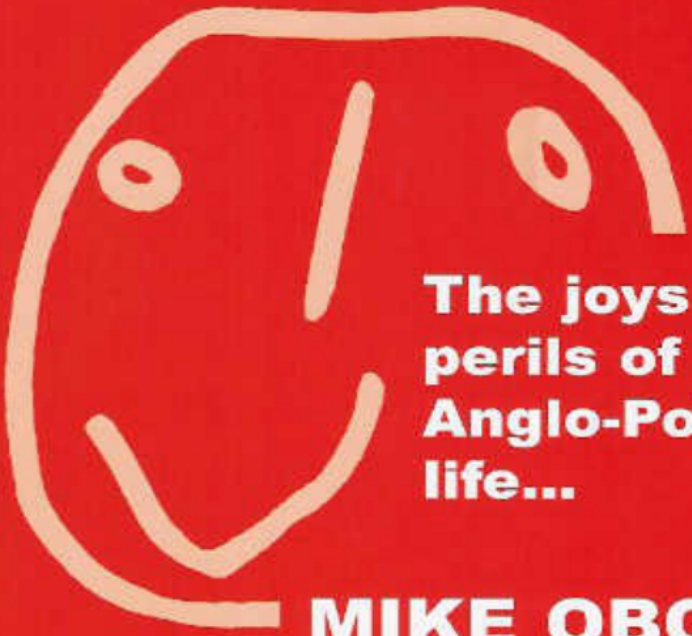

The joys and perils of an Anglo-Polish life...

MIKE OBORSKI

Bigos & Chips...

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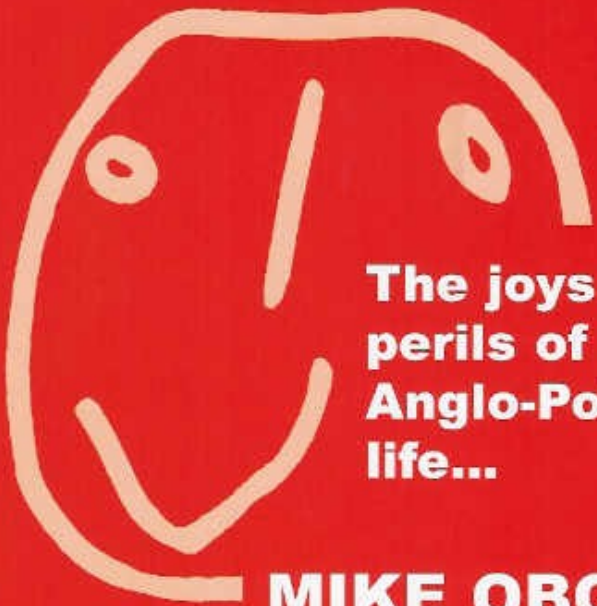

The joys and perils of an Anglo-Polish life...

MIKE OBORSKI

Bigos & Chips...

Bigos & Chips

(or even “Hunters’ Stew & Frytki”)

The joys and perils of an Anglo-Polish life

Author: Mike Oborski

Published by Fran & Mike Oborski

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Published by Fran and Mike Oborski
6, Osborne Close, Kidderminster, Worc's. DY10 3YY, UK
First Printed in Great Britain, 2001
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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A catalogue recorded for this book is available from the British Library.

This smiley face is the logo of
Father Bernard's Children's Fund
Registered Charity 328677

ISBN 0-9541729-0-6
Printed in Great Britain By
Stargold Ltd.
Stourport Road, Kidderminster,
Worc's.

People always used to ask me
“So, do you feel English or Polish?”

I always used to reply
“Well, when I am with the English
I always feel Polish
and when I am with Poles
I always feel English”.

The truth was rather different…

To
Fran
who does all the driving and proof reading
and insists that we are surrounded by cats.
What a long strange trip it’s been.
And also to
Kenton Adler
who told me to write it all down and who in return should be busy working on an album of
Beatles and Byrds covers.

All profits from this book will be donated to
Father Bernard’s Children’s Fund

Polish Humour – One

It is the Poland of the Martial Law period.

His advisers convince General Jaruzelski that,
in an attempt to 'court popularity' (!),
he should go out 'canvassing' door to door with a camera crew.

He duly knocks on the first door in the first block of flats.

It is opened by a small boy.

"Are your mummy and daddy in?" asks our General.
"No" replies little Jasiu.

"Well" says the General "do you have a television?"
"Yes of course" replies little Jasiu.

"And a cooker and a fridge?" asks the General gaining confidence.
"Yes, certainly" replies little Jasiu.

"And a little Polski Fiat?" asks the General?
"Oh, yes" replies little Jasiu.

"Well" says the General "I am responsible for you and your family
having all these wonderful things".

"Just then little Jasiu sees Mummy and Daddy coming up the stairs
and very excited he calls out loudly…

"Mummy! Daddy! Quick! Quick!
Our rich uncle from West Germany has arrived!"

Note by Richard Janecki

This book was published in November 2001 to raise money for the Father Bernard's Children's Fund.

Mike Oborski passed away in 2007 after battling cancer. I created this e-book edition from the original publication using OCR in February 2023 in honour of Mike's memory.

Mike's obituary in the Kidderminster Shuttle is still available online here:

https://www.kidderminstershuttle.co.uk/news/1232866.hundreds-pack-church-to-pay-respects-to-mike-oborski/

An obituary was written and published in the national Guardian newspaper. It is still available here:

https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/apr/05/obituaries.mainsection

Mike was a major influence on me. Even though the tides of life took me from Kidderminster to London and eventually to California, Mike and I could always pick up as if it was yesterday, whenever I had a chance to travel back to Kidderminster. As I worked on this e-book edition, I re-read the book and it brought back many, many memories. I heard his voice again. This has been a very emotional experience.

One of the many nights when Mike, Fran and I adjourned to their house and worked our way through a couple bottles of wine, Mike and I came up with the humorous idea of setting up a fast-food outlet selling Bigos. Of course, it was just a fanciful thought of the sort one has after a fair few glasses of wine in the company of great friends, but one which stuck in my imagination. I ended up setting up a web site for a fictional 'Bigos Bar'. It was a joke which Mike and I built on, initially on a free hosting site and eventually on a paid domain 'www.bigosbar.com'. The paid domain has gone and on Mike's passing, the Bigos Bar was renamed the 'Mike Oborski Memorial Bigos Bar' and moved to Facebook. It was my way of paying tribute to the best friend I ever had.

The Bigos Bar web site still survives on Tripod and can be seen here:

https://bigosbar.tripod.com/

The Mike Oborski Memorial Bigos Bar is on Facebook here:

https://www.facebook.com/oborskibigosbar/

This book is of its time and – mainly in the references in Chapter 6

onwards – would benefit from an update. Do not assume url's, addresses etc. are still valid. I have not updated any of them and of course with the passage of 21 years things have changed.

- 17th February 2023, Redondo Beach, CA

Richard Janecki & Mike Oborski at 'U Fukiera' Restaurant in Warsaw on 16th August, 2002 – photograph taken by Fran Oborski

MIKE OBORSKI

Born in Glasgow in 1946 to an English mother and a Polish father, Mike was brought up in Glasgow, Kenya, Eastcote in Middlesex and Sedgley near Wolverhampton. After studying at Worcester College of Education (he also has an Open University degree) he taught for 28 years mostly in Birmingham before taking early retirement in 1996.

A lifelong Liberal (no NOT Liberal Democrat) he was a County Councillor in Kidderminster since 1973 serving on the Hereford and Worcester County Council and then on the successor Worcestershire County Council. He was elected to the Wyre Forest District Council in 1976 and held many major Committee Chairmanships, was three times Chairman of the Council and Leader of the Council. Mike was also a past Mayor of Kidderminster. He was also Local Government Spokesman for the Liberal Party (no NOT the Liberal Democrats).

Mike and Fran met at college and they married in 1968. They lived in their current home in Kidderminster - shared with four pampered felines - since 1971.

Fran is also a leading figure on the Wyre Forest District Council and a past Mayor of Kidderminster. She was Teacher Adviser for Children in Public Care for Birmingham Education Service.

Mike was the founder Chairman of the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign and ran the Midland Office of Solidarity with Solidarity throughout the 1980s. He was Campaign Director of Poland Comes Home, campaigning in support of Polish membership of E.U. He was General Secretary of Father Bernard's Children's Fund and Chairman of the Wyre Forest Anglo-Polish Society. He served on the Prezydium of the Federation of Poles in Great Britain.

Mike Oborski was Honorary Consul of the Republic of Poland for the West Midlands of the United Kingdom. He and Fran were awarded the Gold Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland by the then Polish Government-in- exile and Mike was subsequently awarded the Knights Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland by then President of Poland Lech Wałęsa.

'Bigos & Chips' is a highly personalised and idiosyncratic account of his coming to terms with his Polish heritage and of his eventual immersion into Polish causes and activities. Humorous and light-hearted, it is also both thought provoking and stimulating.

INTRODUCTION

We were born after the Second World War. Ours is a more mundane and less heroic world than that of the generation that went just ahead of us.

We do not want to see new dates added to the Polish calendar. Our year is already overloaded with the remembrance of far too many invasions, brutalities, massacres, and oppressions inflicted by enemies not to mention the betrayals inflicted by friends'. We also have far too many insurrections, uprisings and acts of heroism to commemorate. Even the celebrations of our rebirths and victories are haunted by the ghosts of the suffering, death and loss with which they were accompanied.

We were born after the Second World War. Those who are just a few years older than us but who are old enough to remember the Second War come from a different world that we can never even begin to understand. They have left to us accounts of unbearable suffering, unimaginable self-sacrifice and incomprehensible heroism. They were the generation of Poles who came to Britain as a result of the Second World War.

Many had suffered under German oppression. Some fought inside Poland in the Home Army and through the Warsaw Uprising while others survived the nightmare of the Concentration Camps. Others had been forced labourers. Many had suffered the horrors of deportation to Siberia at the hands of the Soviets and then that amazing exodus led by General Anders into Persia and on to North Africa. They fought at Monte Cassino and liberated huge areas of Western Europe. Poles fought on land, sea and air and on almost every front of the Second World War.

Having fought for 'your freedom and ours' they saw their homeland betrayed into Soviet hands in 1945 and many hundreds of thousands had to find new homes and build new lives for themselves on foreign soil, many in the United Kingdom. But what of the children of those exiles? What of those children born to Polish parents or mixed parentage at the end or just after the Second World War and brought up far away from Poland in the United Kingdom? Our experience has been, thankfully, less dramatic than that of the previous generation. We have not been tested on battlefields or forced to face the horrors of occupation or deportation by foreign oppressors bent on our destruction.

Ours have been the more modest and slight challenges and achievements of peacetime. However, our story too should be recorded both as a story in its own right and as a footnote to the achievements of that heroic wartime generation which proceeded us.

This small volume is not strictly an 'autobiography'. My life merits nothing so grand. I mention this by way of apology and explanation to the many friends who have played a major part in my life and who may otherwise wonder why they are not mentioned here.

No, this little book is about something more specific. This is about being born in Great Britain with an English mother and a Polish father. It is about how that Polish background has influenced, infiltrated and reshaped my life and taken me on a voyage of discovery both in the wider World - searching for Poland – and inside my own head-searching for myself and trying to unravel the meaning of my personal relationship with Poland.

I do not claim that my experience is typical. Indeed, it certainly is not. I do however hope that my experiences and thoughts may interest and amuse you a little. I will be happier still if you find it just a little thought provoking and stimulating. Best of all would be if this little volume were to provoke or stimulate others of the post war Anglo-Polish generation to share their experiences and thoughts in print!

Mike Oborski
Kidderminster U.K
November 2001
http://www.polish consulate.org.uk
oborski@btinternet.com

1. BONAPARTE, BRAS & BIGOS

The five-year-old who stood in the playground on his first day at school in 1951 knew straight away that he was different from his Glaswegian classmates!

He knew that their impenetrable Glasgow accents were very different to the proper 'King's English' upon which his mother tried to insist. As far as he was concerned it was not a matter of 'better' or 'worse' it was simply that he knew that he sounded different from them.

I say 'he' rather than 'me' because like all adults I have long since lost contact with the little boy I used to be. I no longer understand him. Indeed, I have only very vaguest recollection of him and so I no longer have the right to speak for him directly.

Funnily enough I think it may have completely escaped his attention that his own father's English sounded very different again. He did not know what a Polish accent' was and to him his father was simply his father.

There were other differences.

At some stage during those first days at school the teacher, attempting to break the ice, got each child in turn to recite their individual little party piece. This they did with varying degrees of nerves, tears or confidence. The ensuing performance included several renditions of wildly varying degrees of competence of 'Baa, Baa Black Sheep' and 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' as well as all the other poplar nursery rhymes of the period.

When it was his turn to perform he knew exactly what to do. Plucking up courage he marched to the front of the room turned squarely to face the class and in a loud voice, so as to hide his nerves, solemnly proclaimed 'Augerau, Bernadotte, Berthier, Bessieres, Brune, Davout, Grouchy, Jourdan, Kellerman, Lannes, Lefebvre, Macdonald, Marmont, Massena, Moncey, Mortier, Murat, Ney, Oudinot, Poniatowski, Perigon, St.Cyr, Serurier, Suchet, Soult, Victor'. It was so obvious that he was reciting the names of Napoleon's Marshals that he felt no need to announce what he was about to do! Before a bemused teacher could intervene he continued 'Marshal Prince Józef Poniatowski, created Marshal of France on October 17th 1813, drowned crossing the River Elster after the Battle of Leipzig.' He duly marched back to his seat apparently unconcerned by the total silence, which had contrasted with the enthusiastic applause and laughter

which had greeted the more popular offerings of his classmates.

What his teacher, let alone his classmates, thought of this strange performance is unrecorded. If my teacher briefly hoped that I was the child prodigy which all teachers long to discover then she was very quickly disabused. Come to think of it she probably had not the slightest idea what I was talking about!

The explanation for my strange choice of material was in fact very simple. My father, with the strange accent which I had not yet noticed, evidently took parenting seriously but having no English nursery rhymes with which to send me to sleep had taken to reciting the names of Napoleon's Marshals to me in alphabetical order encouraging me to recite them back until I eventually fell asleep. The list had been extended to include biographical snippets about the one non-French Marshal - the Pole Poniatowski.

This begs two questions. Firstly, why did I chose to recite all of this in class rather than the English nursery rhymes which of course I knew as well as anyone else having of course learnt them from my mother? I have no answer. Secondly, bereft of English nursery rhymes and tales why hadn't my father simply translated some of the Polish children's stories and legends for me? Why not the story of the Wawel dragon or the legends of Prince Lech or Prince Popiel? None of them ever reached me! I cannot say for certain what was going on in his head but on the basis of later experience I will chance a guess. Despite my mother's entreaties my father had steadfastly refused to try to teach any Polish to me as a small child. For him in those early post-war years Poland was betrayed. Poland was over. Poland was dead. It was time to make a fresh start and so he taught me something that was safely non-Polish but which of course came from his own Polish upbringing - stories of Napoleon and his Marshals. So if he wanted to avoid telling his little boy anything about Poland why then did he fail at the final hurdle by picking out for special attention the Polish Marshal - Józef Poniatowski? I suspect he simply could not help himself. While struggling to reject his own roots he could not entirely suppress his pride in them.

My father Czesław Oborski had been born in 1924 into a charmed world of which during my own childhood I effectively knew or heard nothing. Only later did he talk to me. Only later did I find out more. His father, also Czesław, was born in 1896 into a long well-established Polish family. This was a Poland partitioned for best part of a century by the ravenous empires of Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary. At the age of 18 when the First World War broke out, he was an early recruit to the new Polish Legion being formed by ex-Socialist Party

organiser, revolutionary and now Military leader Józef Piłsudski.

Piłsudski saw the war as an opportunity from which Polish independence could be seized as the old order collapsed. To put it simply he suggested that a Polish Legion could fight alongside the central powers (preferably under the less restrictive Austrian command) to defeat Russia and then, when Germany and Austria collapsed under the Western onslaught Poland could seize her chance. He got his wish but in the meantime Poles were conscripted and fought, often against each other, under the banners of all three occupying Empires. Polish territory was reduced to a devastated battlefield. My grandfather served in that unit which has become a legend in Polish history - The First Brigade of Brigadier Józef Piłsudski. He was then and always remained a loyal adherent to Piłsudski.

The complex mixture of patriotic fervour, passionate loyalty to the commander, grim determination and bitter frustration that so many of their countrymen did not rally to their cause was expressed with a remarkably forthright eloquence and directness in their marching song:-

The Legions are a soldier's boot,
The Legions are a sacrificial pyre,
The Legions are a beggar's tune,
The Legions are a martyr's fate.

Chorus:

We are the First Brigade,
A sharpshooter's battalion,
Onto the pyre we have cast
Our life's fate
Onto the pyre, onto the pyre.

Oh, how much suffering, how much pain,
Oh, how much blood and how many tears shed,
Despite this there is no doubt,
That the end of our wandering has given us strength.

They shouted that we were done for
Not believing us, that to want to do something is to be able to do it!
We spilled blood on our own
And our beloved Leader was with us.

No longer do we want your recognition,
Your words, or your tears;
No more will we appeal to your hearts or to your wallets.

The last line as originally written was somewhat different: ‘do waszych serc. Jebal was pies!’ referring to an unnatural act performed on their detractors by a dog.

It is one of the most intriguing of Polish paradoxes that a song which so angrily berated the nation is now one of the nation’s best known and most popular patriotic songs played in Warsaw’s Piłsudski Square on Soldiers Day and Independence Day! The song also gives some indication of the attitude of the Legion’s soldiers who saw themselves as the guardians of the nation’s honour and the deliverers of freedom. It was into this atmosphere that my father was to be born. After the First World War and the proclamation of Polish independence on 11th November 1918 my Grandfather decided to remain in the army serving in the Polish-Russian War of 1919 - 1920. He married Jadwiga in 1919 and they moved into the flat in the Praga suburb of Warsaw where my aunt and cousin and his family still live today. A daughter, my aunt Wiska (Jadwiga) was born in 1920 and my father followed in 1924. My grandfather served as an officer with two famous Polish infantry regiments - the 21st ‘Children of Warsaw’ and the 36th ‘Academic’. At the time of Piłsudski’s ‘coup’ in 1926 he inevitably sided with the Marshal. Between 1929 and 1931 he completed the Polish Army Senior Officers’ Course that was the essential requirement for a successful long-term military career under the Second Republic.

We have a huge composite sepia photograph of this course of 1929-1931. In the centre is a large oval head and shoulders shot of Piłsudski beneath the image of a Polish military eagle and the inscription ‘WOJ 1929 - 1931’. The upper section is filled with oval pictures of the lecturers’ the more prominent the person the larger the picture and the nearer to Piłsudski they are positioned including Rydź-Smigły, Kutrzęba and Piskor. Along the bottom are rows of rectangular photos of the sixty odd ‘students’ including my grandfather.

At the end of the course one of his fellow ‘students’ Major Albin Piotr Habina published a little book of scurrilous verses - one about each ‘student’ on the course. As far as I know my grandfather’s copy - lying on the desk by me as I write - is the only original still in existence. In 1962 on the 30th anniversary of its publication it was signed by the few surviving ‘students’ in Poland and was then dispatched to my father in England who organised a small gathering in London for the surviving ‘students’ now in U.K. to add their signatures as well. While they met in London those in Poland met in Warsaw and the two groups talked by phone. Of the 67 students of 1929 - 1931 only 15 had survived. How sad the transformation. Those brave young men in their thirties in the early 1930s at the heart of the powerful and

triumphant Polish army of the proud and confident Polish Republic - now in their sixties despised and bullied by the authorities in a country ruined by the Nazis and subsequently ruled by puppets of the hated Soviet regime in Moscow.

Ewa Mahey has very kindly translated the verse about my grandfather.

Several of the photographs I have inherited from that period show my grandfather and his colleagues, nearly always cigarettes in hand and uniform jackets informally and sloppily unbuttoned and sometimes playing cards (bridge was the recreational obsession of the Polish officers corps) on or by railway carriages and wagons as they travelled around Poland. The reference to 'wagons' is indeed about moving from carriage or sleeping wagon to restaurant car.

Fran unkindly insists that I am very, very clearly my grandfather's grandson!

Silhouette 9

Without further ado
the word would be:
too plump!,
for if I were
to say bluntly,
which to a friend
would be impolitely
and cause for quarrel,
it would be:
fatso!

In a race he would not even
overtake a mule,
however one of a kind
classic chatty fool!;
do not even try to
get into
a polemic verbally,
for whether about the back
or front it may be,
quiet shall keep you HE,
put you in your place
and before you know it
he shall have all flanks covered
and your whole family

truly cornered.

In the morning - barely awoken
he shall ponder on his meat,
begins to babble loudly,
making the wagons tremble every seat
and instead of going
right to … (where I cannot mention)
he jabbers, jabbers!

Numb are all
and brainwashed,
yet he babbles,
babbles, babbles!
Carried away
his tongue is,
his belly once risen
then once dropped is,
around 'Him'
a vehicle turns
of great dimension
without direction
and then further
and further around,
the whole school:
turns and turns
and as it is now
everything else
turns somehow
like a Madman's dance
in the Polish land,
and as the whole world
trembled,
white I turned
in the flow
of his words
and I'll be damned,
and an oyster I have eaten not???
I gestured to him,
I am gone
to where…?

Yet the race
of words stops not
raising our hair

right to their ends' top.

And then finally
all in harmony
stand beside him
in line surely
only for
silence sake purely.
To them he listens not
only with heavy breathing
speaking as if foreseeing.

Each with a tear:
thinks of the peace;
- at last one guessed
for he asked like a mate
have you Czesiu today
had you dinner yet?
Czesiu turning white
silent he went straight,
with his heart released
of a dreadful weight

And on his glowing face
and on lips with sticky saliva trace
(for connoisseurs mouths do water)
an indication of a thought of restaurants' grace

He will surely be there first,
though of that - I will write no verse.

Yet as to the wagon he does return
he speaks again
and quarrels in turn
and though I claim
with no spite
that in it
is a lot of insight,
plenty of life's wit?
for He had been
here and there;
and always has he in reserve
a pound of pranks
to balance his
serious glance,
and his experiences

only though
as far as women really go,
and of cutlets also though
being a connoisseur he would know.
and as far as knowledge goes
tuppence worth of hard value (shows).

In the evening
after feasting
though on his bed comfy lying
another horse he saddles
and again he babbles, babbles, babbles.

And when sleep falls
in half sentence,
a new matter does arise
all of us
now scratch our heads,
he'd be silent,
but - he snores!!!

A successful military career, his allegiance to Piłsudski, a happy family life and location in Warsaw all provided the basis for a comfortable lifestyle. My father in turn had childhood memories of being taken to meet Piłsudski and of being strictly warned to show no displeasure when picked up and hugged and kissed by the aging Marshal. Piłsudski was a renowned chain smoker with a very prominent moustache that, due to the stench of stale tobacco, was not exactly endearing at close quarters for small children! He remembered too Piłsudski's daughters Wanda and Jadwiga.

He remembered being dressed in a miniature version of his father's uniform complete with sword and medals and insignia all reduced to a suitable scale and copying precisely and exactly those worn by his father. Such was the custom of the period in the military elite.

He remembered one day strolling through the Łazienki Park with his father. An open coach came by, complete with mounted escort, conveying President Mościcki. My grandfather saluted and my father pulled out his little sabre and gave the correct formal Presidential salute. The coach came to a halt and a grinning aide-de-camp ran back and chatted briefly to my grandfather. With a smile he then picked up the little boy carried him to the coach and deposited him alongside the President. At the Belvedere Palace the boy was told that as he was in uniform and had given the correct Presidential salute, he could inspect the Guard if he was sure that he knew how to do it properly. To the

growing amusement of the soldiers, he proceeded to do so not hesitating to criticise their turn out where he thought it deserved and appropriate! He was then taken by Mościcki to see Piłsudski where, after the customary tobacco laden hug he was instructed to report on the inspection.

He remembered going to Piłsudski's funeral in 1935 a moment as solemn and defining for Poles then as the death of Kennedy would be for a later generation of Americans.

He saw the great and the good at close quarters - not only Piłsudski and Mościcki but others such as the inheritor of Piłsudski's military role Marshal Edward Rydź-Smigły, Piłsudski's confidant and political arm Walery Sławek and many of the senior commanders of the army.

He learnt the rudiments of bridge which was, along with horse riding, the off-duty obsession of virtually the whole Officer Corps from watching prominent officers playing cards with his father at the flat on Targowa. He would in time become a very fine bridge player himself.

The Officer Corps were not simply an elite within the Polish army they were also a hugely respected and pampered elite within Polish society as a whole. They had restored Poland to independence in 1918. They had destroyed the might of Soviet Russia in 1920. They had restored the full glory of Polish military tradition. It was as if the glorious winged Hussaria of King Jan III Sobieski, saviour of Vienna from the Turks, and heroic and imperious Polish Lancers of the Emperor Napoleon once more walked the earth.

When that is realised, it becomes easier to begin to understand the attitudes of a young boy born into this environment. It must have seemed to him that he was born at the most glorious moment in history and close to the very heart of that glory. By all accounts he was spoilt and overindulged by his father and although extremely bright, sailed through school with little effort, only doing the minimum required to get by and relying on an easy charm to keep himself out of trouble.

In 1939, when he was just 15 years old, his whole World blew apart. Not only would that completely reshape his attitudes and life but it would in turn permanently mould and shape the future of a baby who was not to be born until1946.

My Grandfather was by then a Colonel and Quartermaster of Army Group Modlin. With the collapse of the Polish forces, he was captured by the Germans and imprisoned for the remainder of the war at Murnau in Bavaria. After the end of the war, he returned to a far from

easy existence in Communist Poland and although he lived on into the early 1960s he and my father never saw each other again.

At the outbreak of war, the family saw to it that my 15-year-old father left Poland via Romania supposedly to go to Paris. They had few doubts about his fate if he had lingered in Poland. Instead, he ended up in England where the Polish authorities placed him at school. A weak back meant that he did not see military service.

At the end of the war, he was in Glasgow where at the age of 21 he married my mother Florence (Floss) Luker in the October of 1945.

The Poland in which he had been raised no longer existed. The pre-war regime, whose leaders he had so admired, was denounced as the author of the defeat of September 1939. Poland had been handed over to Soviet control and indeed much of the territory of the pre-war Second Republic had been annexed into the Soviet Union. To Poles stranded in the West the Yalta agreement between Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt represented total betrayal. They had fought faithfully but now their country was handed to the Soviets. In 1945 Polish units in the U.K. were not allowed to take part in the V.E. Day Parade in case it upset the Russians! For decades successive British Governments would go along with the utterly transparent Soviet lie that it was the Germans and not they themselves who had slaughtered Polish Officers and intelligentsia at Katyń and elsewhere. Across the country there was a series of short lived but unpleasant and occasionally violent anti-Polish demonstrations conveying the message 'Poles go home'. Consumed with their own problems and aspirations, few among the host British community understood that these Poles had nothing to go back to except persecution and oppression or worse.

For my father the Poland of his youth no longer existed. It was all over. Everything was forever lost! All the Poles so abandoned in the U.K. had either to emigrate further afield or to build new lives for themselves in the United Kingdom.

Of these some 50% led, in a sense, a form of double existence. They worked alongside English colleagues and, with time, adapted well to British society. However, in the privacy of Polish Clubs - sometimes based around the Church and sometimes centred on the S.P.K. (Polish Ex-Combatants Association)- they enjoyed a totally separate Polish existence celebrating the customs, traditions, celebrations and anniversaries of the old pre-war Poland. There they could relax with fellow Poles who had shared their experiences and suffering and who did not need explanations. Here indeed the faintly flickering flame of the old Poland was to be kept alive through the long post-war decades.

For the other 50% so terrible and final was their despair that they cut themselves off from everything Polish and tried to create a completely new life in the United Kingdom. That is what my father chose to do. Although he did not go to the ultimate extreme of abandoning or anglicising his surname, he certainly considered it. We very nearly became 'Osborne' instead of Oborski! Some isolated themselves from everything Polish with utterly heart-breaking thoroughness. As a Polish Honorary Consul, every Christmas I receive a few phone calls from kindly English neighbours worried about the elderly Pole next door. The story is nearly always the same: "He has been on his own for years. He hasn't talked to any Poles since the end of the war and he would like to hear the old Polish army songs just one more time. Can you help?" Indeed, the story is sufficiently common for me to have a tape standing by ready to copy once again. Their terrible disillusionment after the war is understandable.

It had taken a century to restore Poland to the map of Europe in 1918 and that miraculously reborn state and its heroic army had fallen to renewed invasion and partition just short of the 21st anniversary of the formation of the Second Republic. The havoc and destruction unleashed in Poland by Adolf Hitler had been unprecedented and now the country was in the hands of Joseph Stalin, another equally brutal and ruthless dictator.

Underscoring the pessimism was a terrible fear. The world had been stunned by the speed and thoroughness with which the Nazis had subverted and indoctrinated German youth. Surely now the Communists would do exactly the same to Polish youth. They would no longer be 'Polish'. They would become 'Communist' - compliant and willing tools of the all-powerful Kremlin.

In the immediate aftermath of the war the Polish exiles also faced the harsh reality of earning a living and that, of course, also played its part in diverting activity into the necessities of self-survival. My father must have been utterly unprepared by his privileged pre-war existence for the situation in which he now found himself. Now he took on one menial job after another - working in a biscuit factory or taking photos of unwilling passers-by at the seaside - as the need arose.

My mother came from a respectable London working class family in which her mother expected the highest standards of probity and behaviour. She had done well at school emerging as a secretary at the Royal Exchange before successful wartime service in the WRNS that further exploited her secretarial expertise. She now found herself reduced to menial cleaning jobs to keep the little family barely afloat.

For my father the past was lost. Contact with the family in Poland was slight and the future was unclear and not entirely hopeful.

For my mother there was hard and unrewarding work, a small child to care for and bills to worry about (she was always the worrier and business brains of the family). Initially at least there was little support from her family. Far from succumbing to Polish charm my English grandmother was instead concerned that her youngest surviving daughter might be carried off to Poland to spend the rest of her days pulling a plough in a muddy field somewhere in the depths of Central Europe in some wretched village lacking running water and sanitation and prone to routine outbreaks of typhoid and bubonic plague! All of this of course passed me by. I was protected. I was loved. I think I was a seriously minded little boy. On the whole I believe I was very happy.

But for me there were no words in Polish. There were no Polish fairy tales or legends, no Polish history, and no Polish songs. In our house there was no Polish food and, although we always had fish on Christmas Eve, no Wigilia. Nor was I brought up as a Roman Catholic. My mother was in those days a very nominal member of the Church of England (in much later life she has developed a deep and enduring faith) while my father was an atheist or at very least an agnostic with a deeply entrenched distaste for Priests. For reasons I do not fully understand I was christened in the Methodist Church, which did not seem to matter as we never seemed to go to Church anyway.

Only in 1986 did I become a ‘born again’ Roman Catholic. An older Polish friend at that time perceptively spotted that this was not only a manifestation of developing faith but also a manifestation of developing ‘Polishness’ He presented me with a Holy Missal inscribed ‘upon your return to the faith of your forefathers’.

With the exception of my father, I knew no Poles and I certainly have no memory of meeting anyone of my own age who was either Polish or from a Polish family. Due no doubt both to my father’s attitude and our travels I never attended a Polish Saturday School. I have subsequently heard much from contemporaries about these classes where the youngsters born to the Polish émigré community spent the Saturday mornings of the 1950s and the 1960s with varying degrees of enthusiasm and success.

For some they were a real boon cementing their place in the Polish community and leading to GCE Polish as a prized educational qualification. For many others they are remembered as boring diatribes on the geography, history and language of an alien world delivered by untrained and inadequate teachers. Many were totally alienated from

the Polish community as a result. Whatever the experience of those days the Saturday Schools of today are of an exceptionally high standard thanks to the inspiration and energy of PMS (Polska Macierz Szkolna) as a driving force in this field.

For me the real nature of those Polish Saturday Schools back in the 50s and early 60s is immaterial. I was not there. In my memory tiny fragments of a foreign culture drifted briefly across my limited horizons.

As a small child I was briefly bedecked in a miniature Polish Highlander's costume. My mother may well still have a copy of the suitably embarrassing and no doubt now faded little black and white photo.

We still have a now dilapidated copy of a book that arrived from Poland round about my fifth birthday. It was a large paperback containing many sepia photographs of Warsaw before the war, in ruins by the end of the war, and in the process of post-war rebuilding. My father pored over it endlessly often showing me the photographs that I did not yet understand. That book must have been a deeply moving link to his past.

Occasionally my father broke into song (actually a grossly euphemistic description for what ensued). These were old Polish army songs such as 'Idzie Zołnierz Borem, Lasem', 'Wojenko, Wojenko', 'O Mój Rozmarynie' and most frequently the Warszawianka. I had no idea of the militaristic content of these songs nor did I know that these were the songs that he had learnt as a small child from his father. The 'Warszawianka', originally an anthem of the November Uprising of 1830, was particularly associated with my grandfather's beloved 36th Warsaw 'Academic' Infantry Regiment.

There was the occasional arrival of tinned Polish ham (vastly superior to English or Danish) and the very un-English passion which I have certainly inherited for pickled cucumbers and pickled beetroot! At the Christmas of 1958 when I was twelve years old my Polish Grandmother - Babcia - came to visit us for the first time. This was the first time that my father had seen her since 1939. In my mind she was short and of substantial bulk and I suspect in retrospect prematurely aged from wartime and post-war hardship. She smothered me with hugs and kisses and spoiled me outrageously. As my father and mother both had to be at work during much of her three visits, I spent a great deal of time with her. We had no language to share but it did not seem to matter. She loved me and I loved her.

Far more forbidding to my young eyes, and I hope that she will forgive me if this book ever falls into her hands, was Great Aunt Helena. She was powerfully built lady and an avid tourist when she arrived to stay with us in 1960 when I was fourteen. My younger brother, Nicholas, had only just been born and so it fell to me to act as tourist guide for the occasion. Helena already had an intensive schedule prepared encompassing all the places she wanted to visit in London. She had an unnerving disregard for the English habit of queuing. I will never forget how having barged her way to the front of the queue at Madam Tussauds she prodded what she fondly imagined to be the first and announced loudly that it was of poor workmanship and did not look at all lifelike. The concerned who happened to be a real life attendant evidently pausing between exertions was not exactly receptive to this unexpected and unwarranted rebuke.

It was during this same visit that I came to the unswerving conclusion that fourteen-year-old boys should not be expected to act as interpreters in the matter of the purchase of brassieres by Great Aunts intent upon a thoroughly and lengthy investigation of the total stock of such garments available for purchase in one of the largest central London branches of Mark and Spencers! I was scarred for life!

On a few occasions I met Colonel Kazimierz Iranek-Osmecki. He had been a close friend of my grandfather. They had served together in the First Brigade of Piłsudski's Legion and had been students together on the Senior Officers course of 1929 - 1931. In the Second World War he was twice parachuted into Poland on military missions and was Chief of Intelligence during the Warsaw Uprising. He was famously and sadly photographed signing the surrender at the end of the uprising. I was too shy to do more than stutter a polite and doubtless incomprehensible word of greeting.

On those occasions my father would greet the Colonel with an obvious and unusual intensity of feeling. I think that for my father, Iranek-Osmecki was virtually a second father whom he both greatly loved and respected. He found in Iranek-Osmecki his one last true link at that time to his roots and to the 'real' Poland that he had lost. He also regarded the Colonel as a realist. Unlike many, Iranek-Osmecki did not 'write off' the youth of post-war Poland, nor did he denounce those in Poland who needed a Party Card in order to survive. 'What would you do if you were in their position and you needed a Party Card in order to survive and feed your family?' he would ask. 'Would that make you any less Polish in your heart?'

Nor would the Colonel accept any post-war promotion from the Government- in-Exile. His view on that sort of thing was clear 'If I was

good enough to be a Colonel in the Warsaw Uprising then I am good enough to be a Colonel now'.

I was, for a few brief years, a keen, if nervously silent, member of the Ealing branch of the Historical Association. On one occasion a distinguished young English historian was to deliver a talk on The Warsaw Uprising. As his talk progressed, I remember his increasing nervousness. As he expostulated on rights and wrongs of Polish decision-making, he had clearly come to recognise that at the back of his audience there was a face that was familiar from somewhere. Eventually it dawned on him that he was addressing one of the leading figures of the Uprising who was also perhaps its most distinguished Polish historian! I had taken Colonel Iranek-Osmecki to the meeting! I have always been careful in my subsequent English local government life to try and make sure that as far as possible I always know who exactly is in the audience whenever I have to speak in public!

One day in 1960 my father took me to White Eagle Hill at Highgate Cemetery in London. Famous as the last resting place of Karl Marx; Highgate is also home to the graves of exiled leaders of the Polish November Uprising of 1830, including Ludwik Oborski who had died in London in 1873. The graves and monuments had just been restored. I was struck both by the obelisk marking the last resting place of Ludwik and two of his colleagues and by the neighbouring grave. It is as if the flat slab of stone is being pushed up from within at one corner of the grave and indeed when you look there is an eagle carved in the stone about to burst out from within the grave. Even the death monuments of those fighters for Polish freedom proclaim their hopes and aspirations for a reborn Poland.

I remember the long, incomprehensible speeches in Polish and the thin drizzle of rain penetrating the protecting trees. I remember too, shaking hands with General Anders, of whose importance I had at that time no real idea. As usual my father explained little. Kindly, at various times the Colonel gave my father a couple of books to pass on to me. One of these was Titus Komarnicki's 'Rebirth of the Polish Republic'. I read and reread it avidly. Not only did I at last have access to a major book in English about Poland but also this was a book about the period that was to increasingly interest me most - the origins and development of the Second Republic. My parents had also given me the two volume 'Cambridge History of Poland' which, although fascinating and the best that was then available in English, was also outdated and very heavy going.

Then to my amazement, in the local public library, I came across a copy of Sienkiewicz's 'With Fire and Sword' in the 1890's translation

by Jeremiah Curtin. Shamefully, I have to admit that having borrowed the book I subsequently failed to return it! As it was only available in a special Library edition and not for public purchase I duly lied and claimed to have lost it. I did however happily pay the full price for a replacement copy for the library.

Even in this poor translation it seared through my consciousness. This amazing saga of Polish national redemption is inhabited by a galaxy of larger-than-life characters - Pan Zagłoba and his friends. Above all there is the 'little Colonel' Pan Michał who is the very epitome of heroism, honesty, nobility, loyalty and self-sacrifice in the national cause! I read and re-read the book until I knew huge chunks almost word for word.

Then I discovered Norman Reddaway's biography of Marshal Józef Piłsudski. Completed in 1939 it is a pure piece of uncritical hagiography and hero worship without any critical balance or perspective. I loved it! This time I lacked the nerve to lose' the library book and miserably returned it after the allotted fortnight. It took me another twenty-five years to find and purchase a battered second-hand copy in Hay-on-Wye - the second hand book centre of the universe.

While at college in the mid 60s I managed to obtain (I think from the Orbis Bookshop in London) three LPs of Polish Music. Two were a collection of the Polish Army songs that my father regularly massacred. Al the classics were there except for 'The First Brigade' that was effectively banned in Communist Poland. My father loved the tape of it that I sent him. The third album was a truly dire collection of 1960s Polish pop music that was little played and certainly never in the company of my musically aware and erudite friends at college.

Listing them like this in print makes it seem as if I was deeply interested and involved in my Polish roots. The reality was very different. These were little intermittent flickers of interest and insight spread over many years. I had no coherent idea or understanding of a Polish background. Indeed, I had no real idea or understanding that I had a Polish background and nor was I looking for one! There was instead a real world, an English World, of family, friends, school, college and study to get on with.

My attitude to Poland and 'Polishness' was in those days both peculiar and deeply ambivalent. Each little opening and insight fascinated and moved me deeply but I allowed each to become a dead end. I read and re-read my 'unreturned' copy of 'With Fire and Sword' and yet, for reasons that I cannot explain, I did not seek out the companion volumes of Curtin's translation of the other volunteers of

the trilogy although I knew perfectly well that they existed. I bought three LPs from Orbis but I did not go back to buy any more.

I had spent five happy years at Northwood Secondary Modern School in Middlesex, from 1957 to 1962, and they were followed by two thoroughly miserable years just down the road at St. Nicholas Grammar School. On limited resources the former actively cultivated any talent and individualism it found while the latter wallowed in complacency and conformity with no expense spared.

My parents had moved to Sedgley on the outskirts of Wolverhampton in the West Midlands while I remained at Northwood Hills in Middlesex staying with friends in order to complete my 'A' Levels. It was at the Grammar School that my peculiar ambivalence to all things Polish - alternating enthusiasm with apathy and inaction - was perhaps at its most pronounced.

On the positive side I delivered what I thought was a brilliant discourse to the 6th Form History Society (which had the added attraction of meeting jointly with the otherwise unapproachable Six Formers from the nearby Girls Grammar School) on 'The Miracle on the Vistula - The Polish-Russian War of 1919 -1920'. Looking back, I would guess that my fellow pupils probably wondered what exactly I was rambling on about. The young Marxist history teacher (exceptional among the staff for a northern accent and for a Durham rather than an Oxbridge degree as much as for his politics) certainly viewed the whole anti-communist enterprise with ill-concealed misery and horror.

When he subsequently invited a prominent Russian academic to address the Sixth Form Society on 'Russia and the Struggle for World Freedom' I promptly threatened to ask questions about the wartime massacre of Polish Officers by the Soviets at Katyń and also about the then current Soviet oppression of Poland. My other unwelcome offer was to threaten to disrupt proceedings by singing 'The First Brigade'. The latter was a total bluff as I did not know the words and could not sing. I was graciously given permission to absent myself from proceedings and was, no doubt wisely, placed under guard for the duration! However, the ultimate part of the Grammar School saga brings me no credit whatsoever. I did not study Science at Grammar School but I was aware of two elderly gentlemen who worked as laboratory assistants. They put out equipment for practical science lessons and cleared up the subsequent mess and generally looked after the science laboratories and all the chemicals and equipment. They were paid a pittance and treated with disinterest and disdain by staff and pupils alike. They were invisible menials who seemed not to merit concern or consideration.

Somehow, I discovered that one was an ex-Colonel and the other an ex-Major of the Polish Army!

One Friday afternoon I plucked up the courage to approach them and tell them the little I knew about my grandfather and his role as Quartermaster of Army Group Modlin in the September 1939 campaign. Amazingly they had both served in Army Group Modlin. They had not known him personally but knew the name. They asked me to bring in a photo and whatever additional information I could find on the following Monday. Inexplicably I did nothing. Indeed, I never spoke to them again.

I have never been able to explain my behaviour at that time. It was as if having found a key to a door which I desperately wanted to open; I then threw away the key and walked away from the door denying, as I left, that it had ever even existed! Maybe I was affected by my father's inherent attitude that the past was dead and we should look to the future. Maybe I already unconsciously suspected that if I opened that door, I would never be able to close it again. Maybe it was a mixture of both plus the unpredictable immaturity of youth. I cannot explain. I often think of those two old distinguished looking, white-haired, slow-moving elderly Poles uncomplainingly going about their menial tasks and struggling in near poverty in a World unaware of their past glories and suffering. What battles and suffering did they experience? Had they been captured by the Germans or had they escaped to fight on in the West? Had they served in the 1920 Campaign or even in the latter stages of World War I? Sadly, not knowing their names I will never be able to trace their careers. I apologise to their shades for my own ignorance and unforgivable behaviour and yet I still cannot explain my actions.

Having taught for a year in Wolverhampton from 1964 - 1965 (in those days you could do so for a year before going to College) I set off for Worcester College of Education. I had made my choice on the highly dubious grounds that it was mixed sex and did not enforce either compulsory Religious Studies or Physical Education upon its students!

I arrived as student numbers doubled. The old paternalistic controls were falling apart under the onslaught of increased numbers. I had arrived just in times for three years of beer, sex, rock music and cheap Chinese food! For a very inhibited and shy young man it was a revelation!

I also fell in love. Fran conveniently shared all the interests that I have just listed! We married in the summer in which we left college in

1968 and we remain married to this day. Our relationship has always been stormy and lively. We are both difficult to live with, cantankerous, and outspoken. As we have not been blessed with children we have not been forced to 'grow up' by the responsibilities of parenthood and so in some ways we both remain stubbornly childlike. Fran will never know or understand just how much I love her despite the way I sometimes behave and I suspect that she would say exactly the same about me.

After 1968 we launched into teaching careers. Fran's career meandered. She was good at the job but never seemed to seek or achieve the promotion she deserved. All that changed in 1990s when having worked for many years for Birmingham she became their Teacher Adviser for Children in Public Care, a role she pursues with passion, conviction, energy, flair and obvious relish.

My teaching career was a mistake that took me perilously close to a nervous breakdown in the early 1980s. As a young County Councillor, I had made the mistake of being both a junior teacher in one Authority and a member of an Education Committee in another! Heads for whom I worked suspected that I 'knew too much' and was in league with their bosses. Both fears were unfortunately groundless. I could not cope. My career enjoyed a brief renaissance in the early 1990s with a full-time contract for supply work mostly patching over catastrophes in Junior Schools. I was however delighted to escape unscathed via early retirement in the Summer of 1996. I was elected as a County Councillor in 1973 to the old Hereford and Worcester County Council and subsequently to the Worcestershire County Council. Meanwhile Fran was elected to the Wyre Forest District Council in 1973 where l joined her in 1976. She waited until 2001 to join me on the County Council. As I write I have served over 25 years as a District Councillor and over 28 years as County Councillor!

We have had our ups and downs. We have been in opposition. We have been in power. Both of us are past Mayors of Kidderminster. Both of us have held all sorts of Committee Chairmanships over the years. I have served three terms as Chairman and am currently the Leader of the Wyre Forest District Council under the Government's new Leader and Cabinet model. Since 1971 we have lived in our current home in Kidderminster in the District Council Ward that we both represent.

We both sit as Liberals (no NOT Liberal Democrats) but that is another story for another time. Working for the local community as an elected Councillor is both deeply rewarding and highly frustrating but those are, once again, other stories for another time.

The years from 1965 through to 1980 were the least 'Polish' of my life. Firstly, there were the hectic College years, then we were working to establish our marriage and our careers and finally we had fallen in love with English local government and local politics.

This period did however see one significant change in my attitude to Poland and 'Polishness'.

Despite difficulties that would have overwhelmed a lesser man, my father was determined to succeed. His aggressive stubbornness found two outlets. Firstly, he was an exceptionally talented bridge player winning the Cutty Sark Pairs Championship in the 1960s. He also played bridge for money and possessed in full all the positive and negative attributes of a ruthless gambler. He had also eventually forged for himself a highly successful career at a high level in the Water Treatment industry. This began to take him all over the world and in 1972 it took him to Poland!

We approached his departure - his first visit to Poland after 33 years of exile - with some trepidation. He left these shores speaking excellent English. When he returned a couple of weeks later, we could barely understand a word he said. He had also reverted to thinking in Polish. He had taken to Poland just as a duck takes to water!

Virulently anti-communist, he had no difficulty whatsoever in dealing with Communist officialdom. He quickly learnt the clothes sizes of their wives and the musical tastes of their children. He provided 'gifts', flattered, cajoled and ruthlessly exploited the 'system' to the full. He conducted business with panache and style and thoroughly enjoyed himself. This would all bear very different fruit for me in the 1980s!

At its simplest my father had reverted to being Polish. Throughout the 50s and 60s he had become if not increasingly English then at least increasingly less Polish. Now perversely and conversely, he became increasingly Polish. He was thinking in Polish and spending increasing amounts of time in Poland on business. It was during this period that I began to think of my father as being specifically 'Polish'. He talked about the family in Poland, places he had seen and deals he had done. He talked about living conditions, gossip and rumour and political circumstances in Poland.

For the first time I became aware of the significance of his relationship with Colonel Iranek-Osmecki. After each visit he would 'report' to the Colonel. Very often he would later tell me the Colonel's comments on the situation in Poland that were always thoughtful and

levelheaded.

It was at this time that bigos began to creep into my life. My father's trips to Poland had revived his appetite for Polish food! I had tasted bigos before but now my father was making it more frequently and my mother had also become adept at the art!

Bigos is a peculiarly Polish dish. It can be a simple snack purchased for unthinking quick consumption in any Polish café or it can be the centrepiece of an elaborate meal. Essentially bigos or Hunters' Stew is exactly that - a stew of sauerkraut, white cabbage and Polish meats. At its finest it is a glorious dish of immense subtlety of flavour and a matter of family hour and pride. Every self-respecting Polish family has its own recipes for bigos that is to them self-evidently the only correct, proper and perfect recipe for bigos regardless of what the rest of the Polish world chooses to believe! Because bigos is one of those rare dishes that positively thrives on repeated re-heating it never tastes exactly the same at any two servings, even if one was actually to employ exactly the same recipe on every occasion. It is a marvellously forgiving dish that, within reason, will allow you to adapt the recipe depending upon what exactly is to hand.

Bigos has a strong and all-pervasive aroma, which Poles find magically magnetic, signalling as it does impending culinary delight and total sensory gratification. Inexplicably many non-Poles seem to feel that the delicate aroma of Bigos ranks with the aroma of badly blocked drains and un-emptied food bins in really hot weather, in the league table of preferred smells and aromas. My advice to any English friend who has not yet tried the dish is simple. Just ignore the smell and tuck in. Within seconds you will have forgotten the smell in the joy and revelation of the taste and amazingly the second time you come across the dish the aroma will have magically transformed itself into a total turn on!

Bigos even made it into the great 19th Century national epic poem 'Pan Tadeusz'. Adam Mickiewicz tells us that:-

In the kettles they were cooking bigos. In words it is hard to express the wonderful taste and colour of bigos and its marvellous odour. In a description
of it one hears only the clinking words and the regular rimes, but no city stomach
can understand their content. In order to appreciate Lithuanian songs and
dishes, one must have health, must live in the country, and must be returning

from a hunting party.

However even without these sauces, bigos is no ordinary dish, for it is artistically composed of good vegetables. The foundation of it is sliced, sour cabbage, which, as the saying is, goes into the mouth of itself; this, enclosed in a kettle, covers with its moist bosom the best parts of selected meat, and is parboiled, until the fire extracts from it all the living juices, and until the fluid spills over the edge of the pot, and the very air around is fragrant with the aroma.

The bigos was soon ready. The huntsmen with a thrice-repeated vivat, armed with spoons, ran up and assailed the kettle; the copper rang, the vapour burst forth, the bigos evaporated like camphor, it vanished and flew away; only in the jaws of the caldrons the steam still seethed, as in the craters of extinct volcanoes.

As we have said, every good Polish family has its own - the one correct – recipe for bigos. Well, here is ours or maybe it is not ours. Fran claims to have acquired the recipe from my mother Floss who learnt it from my father. However, according to Mum, we do it all wrong. Bigos is a dish that truly evolves!

You will need a large jar of sauerkraut, half a small white cabbage (shredded), a dessert spoon of dried mushrooms previously soaked for two to three hours warm water, at least one pound of Polish sausage (boiling ring), half a pound of diced raw pork, sugar, peppercorns, bay leaves, a tube of tomato puree, caraway seeds, vinegar, two decent size glasses of red wine and one small glass of brandy.

Rinse the sauerkraut thoroughly and drain. Place in a saucepan with the shredded cabbage. Drain and add the soaked mushrooms plus fifteen to twenty peppercorns, two or three bay leaves, a pinch of caraway seeds, the diced pork, and diced Polish sausage.

Cover with water, bring to the boil and simmer gently for between sixty and ninety minutes. Then add four tablespoons (at least) of tomato puree, two glasses of red wine, a glass of brandy, a tablespoon of sugar and a desert spoon of vinegar. Simmer gently for a further thirty to sixty minutes. Add more wine and or water, or indeed both, if

it begins to look dry. Reheat before serving. This bigos is best cooked slowly and reheated for an hour or two a day over one or two days. Again add water or wine, or both, if it looks dry.

It can be served alone, with brown bread, or with boiled or mashed potatoes. It can be accompanied by wine or vodka but best of all a good bottle of Polish beer.

We had arrived in the North Worcestershire carpet town of Kidderminster in 1971 by the application of two ruthless criteria, although not this time the fact that it was mixed sex and lacked compulsory physical education though these factors certainly helped. No, this time we were looking for somewhere close enough to travel to work (in Birmingham for me and Wolverhampton at that time for Fran) that also had substantial Liberal Party activity in which to become involved. Kidderminster fitted the bill neatly and we have been happy here ever since.

Unbeknown to us however, the town in which we had arrived also boasted among its attractions the S.P.K. (Polish Ex-Combatants Association) Club in St. George's Terrace and the Polish Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady of Ostra Brama in Pitt Street.

We soon knew of the existence of both these places but we never visited. or even saw the Church in the 1970s and only went once to the Club. That visit was when my then sixteen-year-old cousin Wojtek came over from Poland to stay with my parents and improve his English. He spent a week with us and we became firm friends. We took Wojtek to the Club and spent a happy hour or so drinking Polish beer while Wojtek was able to chat in Polish. The Poles who were present were polite and hospitable if a little reserved. Nobody suggested that we might like to return and in line with my peculiar ambivalence at that time towards everything Polish it did not enter my head to seek to re-enter the building.

It would be the best part of a decade before I would enter the Polish Ex-Combatants Club in Kidderminster again and when I did go back it would be at the beginning of a revolution that would turn Poland upside down and change my own life forever!

2. DAMN PASSIVE SYMPATHY

Like all of those scattered around the world with even the slightest drop of Polish blood I watched the unfolding events of the 'Polish August' of 1980 with sheer uncomprehending amazement and growing pride and joy. All of a sudden, events in Poland dominated our Television screens. New Polish names and images - 'Solidarność', 'Gdańsk', and 'Lech Wałęsa' - became the everyday currency of world news coverage.

These heady events came only a year after the election of a Polish Pope. I will always remember on the day of the announcement of his election watching a breathless British Television announcer proclaiming an exciting news coup on this latest development. They had acquired an old piece of black and white home movie that showed Polish Scouts from London meeting the then Archbishop of Kraków on the slopes at Zakopane in the Tatra mountains of Southern Poland. "This" proclaimed the by now breathless T.V. announcer "is the first ever film of a Pope skiing downhill!" I was left to speculate on what the previous films of Popes skiing uphill must have been like! Sadly, they failed to show the appropriate extracts from the archives!

With the election of a Polish Pope and the emergence of Solidarność, English friends and acquaintances suddenly assumed that I was some kind of expert both on Vatican affairs and on the intricacies of fast-moving events in the Gdańsk shipyards. Did I know the Pope? Had I met Lech Wałęsa?

My joy was great but my knowledge was truly negligible. It took me completely by surprise when on December 13th 1981, General Jaruzelski declared 'Martial Law' and suppressed by force a by now ten million strong Solidarność Trade Union throwing its leaders, including Wałęsa, into prison.

Like everyone else in the West I was shocked and appalled by the suddenness of these events, which, in retrospect, should have been predictable. At first, I had no idea what to do or how to react. How long would this go on? Would Russian tanks roll into Poland as they had over Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Hungary in 1956? Anything and everything seemed possible. It was a strangely confused and half-hearted Christmas for us that year.

I had one Polish friend. Richard Janecki is much younger than I am. He is Polish speaking and born and bred in the Kidderminster area. His parents who had suffered greatly, like so many of their generation, in

the war had established a marvellously secure and loving home in Kidderminster for their three children. It was a truly Polish enclave. I have rarely met such genuinely kind and gentle people.

Richard and I had met not through any Polish connections. I was now a thirty-five-year-old Liberal Councillor with eight years' experience of Council wonk. He was an enthusiastic 'Young Liberal'. As well as political intrigue, Richard and I shared three other passions – the consumption of strikingly large amounts of alcohol, very loud and preferably obscure rock music, and singularly deviant senses of humour which found a common bond in the 'Gonzo' journalism of American maverick Dr. Hunter S. Thompson. Both of us probably knew large chunks of 'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas' and 'Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail' off by heart and both of us can still break into passable imitations of the man known to us as 'the good Doctor' at the drop of a hat - or more likely the passage of a glass or several of strong alcohol.

As we sat there over that Christmas of 1981 and the New Year of 1982 mournfully imbibing alcohol and discussing the increasingly depressing from Poland, we gradually realised that in our own tiny way in the Midlands of the United Kingdom we had to do something.

In the January of 1982 we organised what turned out to be a reasonably well attended meeting at the St. George's Social Club in Kidderminster. I suspect that we chose this venue rather than the Polish Club on the advice of Richard's late father Witold Janecki. The reason for this decision was that it would be rather presumptuous for two 'kids' (only in the U.K. Polish émigré community could I still be a kid' at the age of 35) to arrive at the Polish Club offering to organise the revolution, when the local Poles had already been fighting Communism over so many decades. The idea was to hold the meeting on 'neutral' grounds and to give local Poles the opportunity to give us 'the once over' and to make up their minds as to whether or not we were worthy of serious consideration and support. I would guess that my eight years' experience as a Councillor probably helped.

The outcome of that meeting was the formation of the rather grandly named 'Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign'. I became Chairman and Richard was Organiser. At the end of the evening, we were approached by two Polish gentlemen. They solicitously enquired as to whether or not we had determined upon a venue for our next meeting. When I duly explained that we had, as yet, given no thought to the matter we were speedily invited to use the Polish Club for which there would be no charge! These two gentlemen were Richard's father Witold and local S.P.K. Chairman Zygmunt Zych.

What we did not know until later was that the Polish Club had been going through such a bad time that closure had recently seemed likely. Zygmunt Zych and his colleague Edmund Szymczak had effectively 'come to power' on a mission to keep it open.

They must have regarded us with at least some private reservations. They had played their parts in the War. They had suffered for Poland. They had spent the long post war decades building the Polish community in Kidderminster and resolutely campaigning for Polish freedom at a time when no one wanted to know. Who then were these 'kids' suddenly walking in through the door some thirty-seven years after the event talking about campaigning for Polish freedom when they had never previously done anything remotely useful for Poland in their lives? Indeed, it was on exactly such resentments that most little groups like ours would quickly flounder.

Instead Zygmunt and Edmund were marvellous. They helped us, guided us, and generally put us right when we were in danger of getting things wrong. They rarely complained. They were both absolutely devoted to the S.P.K. and to the Polish cause. I suspect that initially they decided to give us the benefit of the doubt in the hope that, if nothing else, we would boost their bar takings. In that at least they were certainly not disappointed. Richard and I duly moved into the Club and dutifully undertook some truly awesome serious drinking even by demanding Polish standards in such matters.

Too much of my political life has been spent attending or chairing Committee meetings of one sort or another. I know only too well how turgid, time consuming and often unproductive or downright destructive they can become as egos, vindictiveness, score settling, point making and hidden agendas mysteriously replace the real business on the agenda.

By contrast the meetings of the Committee of the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign were a pure joy to chair. It was not that the Committee were passive or compliant - far from it. Indeed, the Committee consisted of a group of very disparate strong willed and outspoken individuals. Two factors made this Committee a great success. Firstly, we were totally united in a single common cause and secondly once decisions had been taken everybody rolled up their sleeves and got on with the job. We carried no passengers.

At our fortnightly Committee Meetings, I would be in the Chair. Fran, always eloquent in her own right, would take the Minutes. Zygmunt Zych would carefully voice the views of the S.P.K. and the local Polish Community. His wife Brenda, also a considerable force in

her own right, was practical and down to earth and kept us on the straight and narrow. Witold Janecki was there at the very beginning with his son Richard who was with us for much longer until university and career carried him away from us. Richard was a one-man campaigning dynamo. Pam Maleszewska was cool and level-headed. Jenny Davis was bright and vivacious with a wicked sense of humour. Betty Maciocha, the widow of a Polish war veteran, was a tireless fundraiser whose stamina often put us all to shame. Jerzy Szauman-Szumski was thoughtful, intelligent and precise. Władysław Kościukiewicz was quiet, soft spoken and said little but was unfailingly correct when he did intervene. Wartime hero Władysław Hauptman, of whom more later, served at times on the Committee but was always an influence to be reckoned with. Henry Lemiech was that rarest of all animals - a treasurer who combined total laid back nonchalance with precise, exact and inconspicuous accuracy and efficiency. His then wife, Jane, was the natural conciliator on the committee with a warm and easy-going personality.

I thought that I was simply going to Chair a committee but in reality I was to discover that I had dramatically changed not only my own but also Fran's social habits. It is to her credit that she only rarely complained and indeed it was Fran who increasingly set the pace with our new lifestyle. It was not that we abandoned our English social contacts. Far from it! We were still rushing around between work and Council Meetings and spending huge chunks of time socialising, plotting and working with fellow Councillors and our Ward Committees. Our local 'Focus' leaflets were going out to every household in our Offmore and Comberton Ward with ever increasing frequency. We had somehow simply added another layer of activity. We had stepped up a gear. 'Free time' was now a thing of the past!

Without at first realising it I had entered a new world which was to dramatically affect my outlook and behaviour. I was now mixing with Poles of the wartime generation. After Council Meetings and often on Saturdays and Sundays I could be found in the bar of the Polish Club. Without realising what was happening I was inevitably learning about their pre-war and wartime experiences, their culture and attitudes, and their views on developments in present day Poland.

Closest to me were Henry Lemiech and Richard Janecki. Henry is slightly younger than me while Richard is much younger. Like me they are part of the post war generation. Unlike me they are Polish speaking. Both of their parents were Polish and both of them came from families that were an intrinsic part of the Polish community in Kidderminster.

Like me both Henry and Richard, in their different ways, found many of the attitudes of some of the older generation of Poles difficult to understand and sometimes difficult to accept. Both see 'Polishness' as essential to their own identities and Henry, although he never makes a song or dance about it, takes his responsibilities as a member of the Polish community in Kidderminster extremely seriously.

From the very beginning the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity campaign was nothing if not active! We set up our first stall on the streets of Kidderminster selling Solidarność badges, handing out leaflets, collecting donations and petition signatures.

Long years of Council experience and political campaigning meant that Fran and I approached such undertakings without trepidation or concern. We had done all this before for other causes. Only on the day did I suddenly become aware of the trepidation amongst the senior members of the Polish community who accompanied us on to the streets. Polish communities in the U.K. did not do this sort of thing. A display of Polish folk dancing for the English was one thing. A political demonstration was quite another. I suddenly wondered where my credibility would be if it all went wrong.

Most of the older Poles looked slightly uneasy and with the exception of Zygmunt had positioned themselves at some distance from the stall. In the event we were immediately surrounded by crowds of English well-wishers who were loudly and enthusiastically expressing sympathy and support. Within seconds there was a queue to sign the petition. One of the older Poles moved over to the stall seized a pile of leaflets and started handing them out. Within a few seconds they were all doing likewise - handing out leaflets, chatting with passers-by and occasionally, when needed, arguing with passion and enthusiasm. We had made a start.

Quickly we were locked into a cycle of meetings, fundraising events, serious activities and publicity stunts. Often the work was routine but sometimes it was truly memorable.

We were very quickly submerged by tons of very good quality second hand clothes donated by a generous local English community for dispatch to needy Poles. As Martial Law restrictions were relaxed such desperately needed goods were transported to Poland by various reputable charities but particularly by the truly excellent 'Medical Aid for Poland'.

In the meantime, the problem was where to store all those plastic sacks of clothes while they awaited transportation to Poland. They

filled our garage. They occupied our loft. They filled our spare bedrooms. They lurked on our staircase. They started to invade the homes of other Committee Members and one was forever stumbling over them in the Polish Club. Something had to happen.

In desperation we turned to the Council. Yes, for a period at any rate, they would lend us the Council's Nuclear War Bunker! Previously unknown, this turned out to be a large basement room with a smaller side alcove located under offices then owned by the Council on the main road between Kidderminster and Stourport. I have to say that I was not exactly impressed by our state of preparedness for the ultimate catastrophe!

The alcove acted as the 'office' with a small rickety table upon which perched a single forlornly lonesome telephone. Rudimentary investigation confirmed that this was connected to the outside world by overhead telephone cable! As a communications network it would not exactly have lasted long in the face of a nuclear onslaught. The larger main room was occupied by a fully equipped and obviously expensive snooker table and by some twenty cases of good quality whisky. My first suspicion was that the Officers who were to man the bunker must have realised the futility of their task and planned accordingly. I was later assured that the scotch was the property of the Chief Officers whisky club purchased by them in bulk with their own money throughout the year consumption at Christmas. No one was ever fully able to explain to me the prospective role of the snooker table in the event of nuclear war! Eventually we also discovered that the air supply was provided by a pump with a filter which in case of emergency would have had to be cleaned daily – from outside the building!!! The mind boggles! Anyway, we pushed everything to the side and packed the place from floor to ceiling and wall to wall with our black plastic bags. Had the Soviets chosen that moment to launch a full-scale nuclear attack on the West I am not sure how we would have subsequently explained our actions to any survivors in Wyre Forest. Fortunately, the local population slept soundly in their beds happily unaware of the perilous local condition of preparations for nuclear war.

Early on we were taking part in national demonstrations in support of Solidarność in London and, on one memorable occasion, in Birmingham where preparations were in the hands of well-meaning local English Trade Unionists. We turned up with our home-made banners and placards in Birmingham's Victoria Square. There was a large number of people milling around and beginning to form a procession ready to proceed through the streets of the city. We could

identify students by their youth and dress and trade unionists by their huge and elaborately stitched Branch Banners. There was a smattering of émigré Poles, identifiable by age and a slight nervousness.

There were also various extreme left-wing groups with banners proclaiming Socialist' this and 'Revolutionary' that. In each case the word 'Socialist' had been converted into what I thought to be, given the circumstances and the actual politics of the banner wavers, a mockery of the lettering style of the Polish Solidarność logo.

I was struck by an overheard conversation between two extremely serious young ladies of differing extreme left-wing persuasion. One was retorting angrily to the other "of course we believe in revolution as well but we want working parties first". Nigel Knowles, a local Labour Councillor whom I greatly admire and respect insists that this is a hoary old Labour Party chestnut of a joke. All I can say Nigel is that I actually saw and heard it happen and the words were delivered with unbridled fury. Anyway, at the time I was just thinking that England was evidently safe from Socialist revolution for at least another generation when I became aware of a more immediate commotion nearer at hand. Mr Hauptman had seen the left-wing banners.

Władysław Hauptman was an enormously decorated wartime veteran. He held the Distinguished Flying Medal from the British having stayed on a sinking Wellington downed in the North Sea in order to get his fellow crew members out onto rafts and to continue transmitting their position. Having been parachuted into Poland as the radio operator on Operation Wildhorn, which got a whole V1 missile out of occupied Poland, he fought on in the Warsaw Uprising. He had been awarded Poland's highest gallantry award - the Virtuti Militarii - and a whole clutch of other Polish gallantry decorations.

By the time I knew him he was prematurely aged, riddled by ulcers and probably worse, which gave him the severe stomach pains that, understandably, made him often cantankerous and sharp tempered. He walked with a stick as one of his knees could turn through almost 180 degrees as the result of his one and only parachute jump, which had taken him into wartime Poland.

Resplendent with his wartime Warsaw Uprising A.K. (Home Army) armband and with his walking stick raised above his head he now hurtled across the square bellowing at the top of his voice "you Communist bastards! People like you put me in the Lubianka! People like you are suppressing Solidarność! People like you are murdering Poles! Clear off you scum before I sort you out!" From the awestruck faces of the Poles around me I guessed that his outbursts in Polish,

which interlaced his English commentary, were even more robust and probably alluded to a rather far-fetched description of the possible parentage, pedigree and ancestry of the leftists concerned.

Had we started this 'action' it would have ended in tears, blood, broken noses and arrests. As it was the massed left simply melted before Mr Hauptman's onslaught. They fled leaving a large empty space occupied solely by Mr Hauptman who was grinning triumphantly and still wielding his walking stick. I was in enormous awe of Mr Hauptman. He was after all the real thing – a genuine war hero. As his health deteriorated, he was increasingly dependent upon Mr and Mrs Janecki and he was devoted to them and to their three children.

Occasionally when he felt well enough Richard and I were summoned at short notice. I treated those summonses with more than a little trepidation. The inevitable advice was always precise, correct and to the point even if it was not always going to be what we wanted to hear. Mr Hauptman would be lying on the downstairs settee that had become his bed. He would obviously be in pain. Richard would be instructed to fetch three glasses while I was instructed to sit down. However much Richard tried to avoid it he would be made to return to the cupboard to get the 'right size' glasses. These consisted of a very small tumbler for Mr Hauptman and two very large tumblers for us. Richard would then be instructed to retrieve several bottles of home flavoured vodka and the necessary pickled cucumbers. "Pour us all a good half glass" he would instruct. "No, no, too little, more, more. Yes, yes, that is better". His half-filled glass was a couple of small shots while Richard and I stared in terror at best part of half a pint of unleashed alcoholic dynamite. As he talked, he would also encourage us to drink while his own glass remained largely untouched. Once our glasses were empty, we would be instructed to repeat the process with liquor of different colour and aroma but certainly of at least equal strength. This process was repeated several times. By the third or fourth instalment Richard and I were in no state to object or to adopt any other strategy that to simply do as we were told. Eventually he would say, "That's it. I'm tired now. Off you go!"

The first time that this happened Richard and I walked without trouble to the front door and stepped outside only to be hit by a rush of fresh air. It was only a few feet from front door to front gate but how I made it I will never know. Suddenly there I was wrapped around the left-hand brick gatepost hanging on grimly utterly unable to feel anything from the waist down. I turned to call to Richard for assistance. My brain was working furiously and my mouth was open and my lips were moving but sounds refused to take shape or to

emerge. I stared at Richard. He was wrapped around the right-hand gatepost. He was staring at me and his mouth was open. His lips were moving but no sound was coming out. As we clung there it slowly dawned on me that it was only about 7.15pm and we were due to meet friends at the Polish Club for a serious drinking session in fifteen minutes time. The world seemed to close in around me.

Later when Mr Hauptman was dying, I was summoned to see him in Hospital at 2.30pm on the determined day. When I duly arrived and asked the duty nurse on the Ward where to find him, she replied "follow the track in the carpet" and indicated towards Mr Janecki who appeared to be keeping guard outside Mr Hauptman's room. "Ah, Mr Oborski you are a few minutes early" he said referring to his list, "the last person is still in with him. They should only be a few minutes". Sure enough at precisely 2.30pm the door opened and a tearful Pole duly emerged. I went in not knowing what to expect and desperately worried in case I said the wrong thing. I need not have worried as I scarcely got a word in. The living skeleton propped up on the bed was doing all the talking. "Michael, we will meet again. You can be sure of that but it will not be in this World. We will have plenty of time to say nice things to each other then". He then launched into a short lecture on my mismanagement of the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign and gave me clear and precise instructions on how to put things right. After ten minutes I was dismissed. As I left Mr Janecki was ticking off the 2.40pm appointee. Unable to speak I brushed past, tears in my eyes.

Mr Hauptman died, I think, in the August of 1986. Sue Ryder, Baroness Ryder of Warsaw was there for the funeral. This tiny apparently frail but utterly inexhaustible little lady who had a heart big enough for the whole world was desperately upset because she felt quite fallaciously that she had not been able to do enough for him. I think that this great-hearted soul had no idea just how much she was loved by Hauptman and all her other Polish 'boys' who had jumped into Poland.

That year on Christmas Eve Mr. Janecki appeared on our doorstep with a carefully wrapped bottle and an attached envelope. "It's from Mr Hauptman" he told us. "He packed it himself. He would not go into hospital until all the vodka was ready, bottled and packed". He departed clearly having many similar such packages to deliver.

Fran and I sat down tears in our eyes staring at the package. It was some moments before I could bring myself to open the wrapping paper. Eventually I reached to open the envelope and read the Christmas card. However, there was no Christmas card. Instead, there was a letter

running to several densely packed pages of writing in Mr Hauptman's hand. In it he set out all the points that he had raised with me in the Hospital. It ended with the hope that I would by now already have acted on his advice but that had I failed to do so now would indeed be a good time to start! Who could not love such a man? They don't make them like that anymore!

Early on in our campaign we received a letter from a lady in Scotland who did not give her address. She enclosed a press cutting about 22 Polish merchant seamen who upon the declaration of Martial Law had 'jumped ship' in Panama. They were now being held in deplorable circumstances while the Polish regime demanded their return and the Panamanian authorities simply dithered.

This was Richard's finest moment. He wrote letters. He wrote to the United Nations. He wrote to the Red Cross. He wrote to everybody. In retrospect I am pretty sure that he did not exactly have a working plan or a strategy. He simply bombarded the great and the good with letters determined not to stop until he got results. I was barely aware of what he was doing. "What are you doing about those seamen?" I would ask. "Writing letters", he would reply. "Can I have more money for stamps?" One day at work the school secretary stuck her head round my classroom door. "It's the Embassy" she said handing me a phone number. "Can you phone them at lunchtime?" I could not understand why a cinema wanted me to phone them. At lunchtime I discovered it was neither a cinema nor indeed an embassy. It was the Canadian High Commission.

They wanted to assure me that the Canadian authorities were sponsoring eleven of the seamen and that the United States authorities would be sponsoring the other eleven. They were all being found accommodation in Canada and jobs on the ships that ply their trade on the Great Lakes. Everything was in hand and they were grateful to us for getting the ball rolling. I was astounded.

Later we discovered that one of Richard's letters had eventually reached a DJ on a Polish language radio station in Chicago. He had launched an on-air appeal for funds and lobbying. Money poured in and Chicago's huge Polish community had indeed donated and lobbied. Meanwhile another of Richard's letters had reached the pro-Polish Senator Edward Kennedy whose efforts had been crucial in organising American and Canadian intervention on behalf of the stranded sailors. I was seriously impressed. We were a tiny provincial organisation with pitifully inadequate resources and facilities. Richard had demonstrated what could be done with papers, envelopes, stamps, persistence and imagination. It was an important lesson.

Later on, the Milk Race (a lesser relative of the Tour de France) passed through Kidderminster. There was a Polish team in the race. 'Solidarity with Solidarity' (of whom more later) asked us to organise a local protest. They were quite clear - no trouble, no bother and make it fun. We duly obliged. On the Saturday morning we arrived at the Kidderminster Car Park from which the day's stage was scheduled to start.

We were wearing 'Solidarity with Solidarity' t-shirts. We had banners and placards. There was a huge crowd of spectators. We handed out thousands of leaflets. On one side, in big print, they declared "We hope that you have a really great day enjoying the Milk Race but please take just a few moments to remember what is happening in Poland." The other side of the leaflet contained a number of bullet points spelling out in rather more detail the situation in Poland. The Mayor of Kidderminster, Labour's Cllr Brian Moule, complete with gold chain of office, was due to present the various prizes for achievements on the previous day's stage before launching the next stage of the race. Spotting us he wandered over and asked for a large 'Solidarność' badge to wear alongside the chain. We happily obliged. We were even happier when he announced his support for Solidarność over the microphone from the platform to considerable public applause.

Meanwhile the Polish riders had been flashing smiles and signalling their support with discreet 'thumbs up' signs. Their 'minders' were furious.

Just minutes before the stage was due to start the Swiss Team Manager hurtled over -"Quick, we have made a decision. Can you give us some of your t-shirts?" He wanted one for each of his riders. There was no time to get new ones from the car. The t-shirts were mostly being worn by our female members. To the surprise of passers by they were hurriedly cajoled into removing their t-shirts on the assurance that new ones would be forthcoming shortly! The still warm t-shirts were handed over to the Swiss. As they cycled off each Swiss rider was wearing a 'Solidarity With Solidarity' t-shirt. Better still each Swiss rider riding alongside and holding aloft the hand of a beaming Polish colleague!

As they disappeared from view we turned and saw the Polish team 'minders'. Their faces spoke volumes. They now had some difficult explaining to do when the photographs appeared in the next day's morning papers!

Again, we had learnt a lesson. There is no need for riots, violence

and upsets to make a point. A grin and a joke are far more effective and the 'enemy' hates it! When all else failed and there was a lull in the proceedings, we were quite capable of demonstrating and protesting against ourselves!

We discovered that the then Kidderminster Museum was to host an exhibition of Soviet Posters from 1917 through to the early 1920s. They were mostly of an anti-religious nature.

Not only was the Museum owned by Wyre Forest District Council, which was happily supporting us, but the posters had been brought to Britain in the first case by an Aunt or Great Aunt of our then local Conservative M.P. Esmond Bulmer who was our Honorary President.

With banners and leaflets we protested regardless. The demonstration was attended by the then Chairman of the Council Jim Millington who made an enthusiastic speech supporting us and denouncing the Council of which he was the Chairman!

And so essentially the Chairman of the Council effectively denounced himself while we protested at a perfectly harmless exhibition of material brought to this country by a close relative of our own President. No wonder the Museum Curator was bemused. He must have been pleased however as people poured in to see what we were actually protesting at. We too were happy. The press publicity was excellent.

Politicians of all parties in Wyre Forest were remarkably supportive.

Throughout the 1980s we invited Councillors and Officers attending the annual Mayor of Kidderminster's Civic Sunday to wear red and white carnations donated by the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign - as a sign of solidarity with the Polish struggle. There was always 100% support! This united support from the local English political establishment was enormously welcoming and comforting as was the support from the local Member of Parliament – firstly Esmond Bulmer and then Anthony Coombs. Way back the local Polish Ex-Combatants Association had taken to inviting the Mayor of the day to the post-Christmas Dinner. Polish émigré families still celebrated the traditional Polish Christmas Eve Wigilia with its twelve-course meat-free meal (or a more modest variation thereupon) and the breaking and sharing of the Opłatek wafer. However, like many Polish émigré communities they had also developed this new tradition of holding a community Christmas Dinner or Opłatek shortly after Christmas. The most moving moment is the sharing of the Opłatek wafer. The spirit of

that moment is beautifully described and evoked in Treasured Polish Christmas Customs And Traditions (Polanie Publishing):-

The Opłatek, frail, perishable, has for all Poles a mystical meaning which cannot be explained logically. At Christmas time it is sent to absent members and close friends in strange lands, who in their loneliness, partake of it, as of communion with their loved ones at home.

The Opłatek, of little monetary value, is the treasured link that brings warm memories of Poland to her children settled in different parts of the World. Losing reality for the moment, they once again dream that they are seated with the family at the Wigilia table, enjoying the blessing, forgiveness and warmth under the parental roof.

It is also said that the sharing of the wafer is the moment 'when that which should be forgiven is forgiven and that which should be forgotten is forgotten'. In Kidderminster the presence of the Mayor lent weight and recognition to the event but now, under Martial Law, the successive Mayors of all political persuasions became more forthright in their speeches on the night. Now they wanted to openly and firmly declare their support for the struggle for freedom in Poland.

As time progressed I too, as WFP.S.C. Chairman, was with Fran invited as a guest to these marvellous dinners. Anxious to make some small recompense I offered to produce menu cards for the event. This was accepted as a generally good idea and I have been stuck with it ever since!

A few years ago, I compounded the commitment by cheerfully offering to produce herrings in cream as an additional course. Typically, I had not of course worked out the logistics of serving this dish for eighty to a hundred people! Inevitably this has become an annual folly in which I am generously and cheerfully saved by Fran and Henry and Brenda Lemiech.

Herring in cream, or to give it its proper name Śledź w Śmietanie, is a peculiarly Polish delicacy. I have often wondered who invented it and in what circumstances. I have long learnt that if I offer 'herrings in cream' to unenlightened British guests they inevitably shy away in terror. If, however, they simply stumble across it on our buffet table at a Consular Reception then they immediately fall in love with it and demand the recipe forthwith. This is such a regular occurrence that we have actually had to both produce a little leaflet giving the recipe and to add the recipe to the Consular web site.

As with many Polish favourites the recipe can vary but here is our version:-

You need herrings marinated in dill (the small jars of herring pieces in dill sold at most branches of Waitrose are fine), boiled or tinned potatoes, hard boiled eggs, an onion, sour cream, sugar, a lemon, cucumber, parsley and possibly spring onion or chives.

Slice the onion very finely and leave to blanche in boiled water to which has been added the juice of a whole lemon. Rinse the herrings under the tap and allow to drain for a few moments. Lay the herring pieces out closely packed side by side in the bottom of a shallow dish. Cover the herrings with a thin layer of the sliced potatoes. Empty sufficient sour cream to eventually completely cover the herring into a bowl and stir in sugar to taste (say a tablespoon full to a carton of cream). Cover the herring carefully with cream. Quarter the hard-boiled eggs (allow at least half an egg per person) and lay out decoratively on top of the layer of cream. Slice the cucumber very finely and half the slices. Place the sliced halves vertically and overlapping around the edge of the dish. Drain the blanched onion and sprinkle the onion over the dish. Finally sprinkle finely chopped parsley (mixed with finely sliced spring onion or chives if you wish) over the dish. Place in the fridge to chill.

Traditionally and preferably herring in cream is served with a shot of chilled vodka preferably in a glass that has first been allowed to frost in the deep freeze.

Delicious!

Meantime we were also collecting material and cash for ‘Medical Aid for Poland’. The lack of medical supplies in Poland had hit crisis point in the early and mid-1980s and cross infection had become rife in Polish hospitals as basic cleaning materials became unobtainable. Tightly audited Health Service doctors could give us little more than sympathy. Veterinary Surgeons were a different prospect. We were able to secure large quantities of veterinary drugs. These were exactly the same as those intended for human use except that they came in much lower dosages and so the recipient Pole would have to take several in order to reach the required dose. Careful labelling in Polish was thus essential. Poles seeking an injection needed to provide their own syringe. Again, while Doctors were unable to assist, Vets in the U.K. could assist albeit at their own expense. We have always had herds of cats organising our day-to-day domestic life and they have always had the luxury of an enormously caring, erudite and witty vet in Norman Simpson. Our cats clearly consider that he has an excellent ‘bedside’, or rather ‘basketside’, manner. Norman was a prime mover and donor in securing syringes for us to send on to Poland. His assistance certainly saved lives.

Later on down the road Edmund Szymczak, a key figure in the running of the S.P.K. and of the Polish Club in Kidderminster, undertook an amazing one man campaign. Without publicity he simply cajoled and convinced doctors and hospital administrators into donating all sorts of equipment and materials that he duly passed on to Medical Aid for Poland. In this manner he sent more than £20,000 worth of essential medical items off to Poland.

From time to time, we were able to help with urgent individual medical cases. The most moving was when we paid for a small Polish girl to come to Liverpool for a lifesaving hole in the heart operation. At some point in time we hit upon the idea of having regular fundraising stalls at the many Summer Carnivals to which every self-respecting English provincial town is prone. The plan was brilliant in its simplicity. We ran massive tombolas. They worked like this. You paid 10p a go, 50p for 5 tickets, or £1.00 for ten tickets that you drew out of a huge drum of tickets. Any ticket finishing with the number '5' or '0' was a winner. Any ticket ending with any other number was a loser.

The odds-on winning were actually precisely 1 in 10. Most tombolas run on much longer odds and are therefore much less attractive as you rarely or ever win. On our tombola there were winners all the time. Normally too there is chaos as the organisers search for prize number '245' which has been dutifully numbered but mislaid or look for prize number '70' which was mistakenly given out instead of prize number '75' an hour earlier.

Our system was beautiful. If you drew a number ending in '5' or '0' between let's say (I cannot remember exact details now) '0' and '300' you won a beautiful silk rose. As these generally sold for £l.00 each in the shops anybody spending £1.00 on tickets and winning one was generally happy that they had achieved value for money. As that rose purchased in bulk had cost us only 5p we were making 95p profit on that single transaction.

Instead of numbering individual prizes we offered three or four categories of prizes. The number you drew determined the category from which you could choose from a wide range of prizes suitable for different ages and tastes. As well as the pleasure of winning you got the extra pleasure of choosing. As well as the pleasure of taking your money we got the pleasure of not having to spend endless hours individually ticketing winning prizes!

If you pulled out the number '1000' you won the massive furry toy – bear, elephant, tiger or dog - of your choice. These huge brightly

coloured stuffed toys cost £25.00 in the shops. We bought them in bulk for around £4.00 each! Odds were finely calculated so that always after deducting all overheads and costs there was 65p of profit from every £1.00 worth of tickets sold.

The operation was fast and slick and profits were big.

We would be there for the day with Henry and Jane Lemiech and Betty Maciocha. Zygmunt and Brenda Zych were always there as were Jenny Davis, Mr Kosciukiewicz, Mr Szauman-Szumski, Pam Malezewska and others. We took awnings, chairs, sandwiches and substantial supplies of wine (which we paid for ourselves). Often, we ended up back at the Polish Club discussing the day's events and future plans over a few beers or more.

While the system was simple the stall was not. Our friend Peter Price increasingly refined a monster of wooden posts and nuts and bolts. I suspect he was reliving the Meccano joys of his childhood! As bemused Market Traders, who had themselves just threaded a few simple metal tubes together in seconds to construct a stall, watched in total awe and amazement Peter would cajole Henry and I into assisting to construct the monster. It took some thirty minutes to piece together and was probably better designed to resist tempests or invaders than Hadrian's Wall or the Maginot Line.

In time we purchased a proper Market stall that could be assembled in seconds. It was functional, but, in Peter's eyes at least, it clearly lacked the challenge and sense of achievement with which our earlier monstrosity was undoubtedly endowed. I don't think he ever forgave us. I can still see Pete wandering around with a bucket of tickets in one hand and a gigantic furry bear perched aloft on his shoulders shouting, "Come on and win my furry friend. He's completely house trained and he's had less to drink than me!"

In the immediately pre-video period, we organised a Polish Film Season at the Polish Club. Henry borrowed the Bell and Howell projector from school and large cardboard cartons containing evocatively battered metal cans enclosing huge spools of film started to arrive regularly. The films were generally, though not always, black and white or more accurately a grainy grey with long white scratches and an endearing white snowflake effect. I had seen the occasional Polish film before on late night television and I were now able to wallow in the titles of our choice – 'A Generation', 'Kanal', 'Ashes And Diamonds', 'An Italian In Warsaw', 'Eve Wants To Sleep', 'Lotna', and 'Everything For Sale' were among the favourites.

The British authorities were unusually helpful. Ignorant of such requirement I contacted Customs and Excise to see what would be required. The officer concerned patiently explained that if we were to charge the public for admittance, we would need a separate purpose built projection room and would have to meet stringent fire safety requirements. Understanding that this was a small-scale operation in support of a good cause he finally suggested that the best thing was for me to ignore the regulations and for both of us to forget that we had ever had the conversation.

We did not make a fortune but we certainly enjoyed ourselves and once again I was learning about Polish culture.

Polish dance groups and bands were a great attraction but for us the high financial outlay made them a risky and nerve-wracking undertaking. The sixty strong London based Mazury Dance Company put on a marvellously professional and enjoyable show in the Civic Hall at Stourport-on-Severn. The concert was a sell out and we also had stalls selling Polish foods and goods and displays of Polish prints. Mazury only charged for their travel and took no fee. The substantial proceeds from the evening went to Medical Aid for Poland.

We also booked the Dąbrowa family whose advertisement I had noticed in 'Folk Roots'. They proclaimed themselves to be a sort of Central European Steeleye Span updating Polish and Ukrainian folk music into a modern form of 'folk-rock'. Uncertain of their merit or pulling power we cautiously opted to put them on at the Polish Club. Again, they were taking only their traveling costs.

On the appropriate Saturday they duly arrived. The band consisted I think of Mum and three sons and three daughters. They performed in magnificent Polish national costumes from the Kraków region complete with peacock feathers in the men's red square caps. Strangely they spoke neither Polish nor Ukrainian although they had toured in Poland singing in Polish! They played as a tribute to their late father, a Polish opera singer who had repeatedly escaped from German prisoner of war camps during World War II. They were absolutely charming and great fun. Henry had noticed their bemusement when they were introduced to the modest main hall of our little Polish Club. I only realised we were in trouble when they started unpacking the bus. Almost the first item to emerge was a lengthy corrugated bright yellow plastic tube at least eighteen inches in diameter. This was, I was told, required in order to conveniently carry all the electric cables! It was then that they asked us to assist in unloading the truly massive speaker system.

In short, volume wise, they were fully equipped to outdo Pink Floyd

at Pompeii! Fortunately, they saw the funny side and turned down the volume to a level commensurate with the size of the room.

They were absolutely superb - fine instrumentalists and great singers capable of carrying superb and complex harmonies. The evening was a great success and we immediately booked them to play at what was to be an even more successful sell out concert at the Civic Hall in Stourport-on-Severn. As well as their own brand of Polish and Ukrainian folk-rock they also performed a spine-tingling version of Gordon Lightfoot's marvellous 'Wreck Of The Edmund FitzGerald'.

We held regular Country and Western Dances at the Polish Club. Every penny helped and local English bands, with enormous generosity, happily played for free or for very little indeed.

In our other lives politics and council work continued. Sometimes our different worlds came neatly together.

We were at a Liberal Party Assembly - the national annual conference of the old Liberal Party. Liberal International was the rather staid international agency of the party much given to prestigious up market Assembly receptions. The tickets were however expensive. We could not afford two. Fran was chosen! Her task was to confront the hated Russian Ambassador, bring him to heel and to present him with a booklet spelling out details of the oppression in Poland under Martial Law inflicted by Moscow's puppets in Warsaw. There was only one slight problem. Fran had no idea how to recognise or identify the Russian Ambassador.

Using our treasured and expensive ticket to gain access she spotted David Alton, then Liberal Member of Parliament for the Edgehill area of Liverpool. David had no idea what the Russian Ambassador looked like but knew a man who did. A moment later and he was explaining the whole predicament to the Ambassador of the United States of America! Having secured a glass of champagne for Fran, he happily reassured her "Don't worry girl. I'll introduce you personally to the commie bastard."

When the Soviet Ambassador duly arrived, he was immediately 'glad handed' by the U.S. Ambassador with the words "Hey, nice to see you again. This little lady has something to say to you…" and duly nudged Fran forward. This was of course scoring at an open goal. The Russian Ambassador could only grin and take it. It was too late for his 'minders' to push Fran aside and to walk off would only have been to lose further face in front of his U.S. counterpart. Fran smiled sweetly and duly delivered message and publication to American applause. We

thought the ticket money well spent.

We had also ‘adopted’ political prisoners at the behest of ‘Solidarity with Solidarity’. The intent was twofold - namely to secure their release and to get practical assistance to their families. We took on three such prisoners and their families. I will not name them here. They have moved on and we have lost contact. I do not have the right to identify them without their permission.

Long after the event we sat with one of these families in a restaurant in Warsaw. He had been imprisoned and treated badly in the first wave of Martial Law arrests. As we sat talking his wife said to me “of course it was thanks to you that I knew he would survive”. She explained that her husband had been imprisoned several hours journey from Warsaw while she had been stuck in the capital with very little money and two small children. Visits to the prison had been few and far between. They had been filled with gloom and uncertainty. Then one day as she was leaving after a visit a morose prison guard had suddenly turned on her. “Why is your husband so f***ing important? Why do idiots in the West care about that little Polish shit?”

As she walked away the words sank in like a sudden ray of sunshine and all her worries simply melted away. Someone in the West knows about him! Someone in the West is asking questions about him! He is safe! He won’t ‘fall down the stairs’! He will not have any ‘accident’! The West know about him! He is on their list! She was sure he would come home. Nothing else mattered.

My father had been going back to Poland on business since the early 1970s. He was selling water treatment chemicals for industrial boilers. This was becoming a near monopoly business with fewer and fewer competitors. The Russian and Polish Governments needed what he was selling. He carried trinkets for customs officials (initially early primitive digital watches) and knew the musical tastes of the children of ministers and senior officials. On one occasion my mother revolted at the prospect of having to purchase seven copies of Pink Floyd’s ‘Dark Side of the Moon’ prior to one on his trips to Poland. He also knew the bra and dress sizes of their wives and mistresses. All of this considerably eased the flow of business!

He was no spy but he was happy to carry unofficial messages between the British Government ministries and their Polish counterparts. Messages that they did not want to go through more recorded and traceable conduits.

After Martial Law his position was ever more ambivalent. He would

attack me over my involvement with pro-Solidarność campaigns “You little rat you are destroying my business. Any more of this and I’ll kill you!” At one and the same time he was openly smuggling (a contradiction in terms I know but one that accurately describes his activities) ‘white books’ into Poland. These were tiny books of microscopic print with white covers (hence ‘white books’) of dissident material produced in Paris. Being a good atheist, he even happily smuggled Bibles. He also carried large sums of money into Poland for us, passing it on to the families of internees.

I suspect that he was thoroughly enjoying himself getting away with murder. The Polish authorities must have been aware of his activities but he was left well alone, as they needed what he had to sell. He loved it. He flattered them and plied them with meals and ‘gifts’ and then set about doing everything he could to undermine them!

He would arrive back from Warsaw and go straight onto the attack when he saw me. “You little bastard! Are you trying to ruin me? Yes, yes, of course I delivered the money. Yes, his family are fine. Oh yes, you stupid boy, I have brought you this book from some idiots in Warsaw.” The book was a collection of prints of old Warsaw. It was a gift from an underground dissident group in Warsaw. I treasure it still - not only because of the kind generosity of those Poles who had far more pressing things to worry about than thanking us - but also because it was triumphantly carried back to England by my crazy, frustrating, intolerable father who cursed me, drove me up the wall, loved me and never once turned down my insane requests to deliver packages or money in Poland and never once failed to deliver. Only now do I realise the risks he was actually taking, He got away with it because the Polish authorities needed what he had to sell but that is said of course with benefit of hindsight. At the time he was taking real risks - partly for the hell of it but partly because I asked him.

We also adopted Stanislaw Kotowski, a Polish Liberal who ended up sharing a damp and ill-lit three metre square cell with Bogdan Lis. Kotowski suffered from severe stomach pains and poor eyesight. His crime had been to be caught travelling between Gdańsk and Warsaw in possession of a small supply of printing ink and paper. We were able to lobby on his behalf and my father managed to get some money through to his wife. The Kotowski’s are now based in Canada but also have business interests in Warsaw and we remain in touch by Christmas Cards. It was Kotowski’s imprisonment, which gave me my one-second of fame in the international media. Speaking at one of the 13th of the month demonstrations outside the Polish Embassy in London I announced “In Poland Stanislaw Kotowski acquires some paper and ink

in order to print a leaflet and they throw him into a prison cell. In England I acquire some paper and ink in order to print a leaflet and I get elected". On a short news day, the Polish Service of the BBC picked up the quote and ran with it at the start of that evening's news. The comment was later immortalised in a volume of Polish 20th Century quotations. Alas, neither before nor since have I apparently ever said anything worthy of note!

At times we were, I think, becoming just a little 'gung-ho' - just a little bit over the top. We had survived where similar pro-Solidarność groups had perished. If it needed doing, we considered ourselves the guys to do it. If Tadek Jarski of Solidarity with Solidarity asked us to do anything we happily agreed instantly - only to worry about the consequences later! Similarly, if Tadek was up to something in London we also wanted to be in on the action in Kidderminster. At one point Tadek mounted an extremely well displayed exhibition in London. Large boards carried beautifully displayed photos and captions depicting both events in Poland and the work of Solidarity with Solidarity. Solidarność banners draped from the ceiling. The impact was stunning.

It was love at first sight. We just knew that we had to display that exhibition at the Polish Club in Kidderminster. It was a huge success launched with a very well attended civic reception. Fortunately, our guests and the general public who poured in to see the exhibition over the days that followed had no idea of the organisational shambles that had proceeded.

They were not there when we realised that we had hired a very large van to go to London to collect the exhibition. Nor were they there when we realised that we did not have anyone with any experience of driving a very large van! Fran volunteered. The verdict remains out on whether this was magnificent bravery or total folly. True we returned physically unscathed but we did all somehow suddenly feel much, much older!

Nor did they see my miserable cowardice. The ceiling of the hall in Kidderminster was much higher than the London ceiling from which the Solidarność banners had been hung. Somehow, I convinced Richard that as long as I had two feet squarely on the ground and was supporting the ladder it would be perfectly acceptable for him to be balanced precariously on tiptoe on the top wrung stretching upwards to fix the banners to the ceiling. Inexplicably he appeared to fully accept the logic of my reasoning. There were, I remember, several dozen such banners!

One night towards the end of the communist period I wandered into the Polish Club only to find Edmund and Zygmunt in conspiratorial debate in a corner of the bar. Eventually they explained that 'Orzeł Biały' (White Eagle) - the Choir of the Polish Army were to perform as part of a national tour in Birmingham which is just twenty miles from Kidderminster. Much as they wanted to go, they had consulted other Polish communities in the region and the general consensus was that we should all stay away. Even though it was clear that the end was near the hated communists were still in power in Poland and the Polish Army was an agent of the terminally declining regime. This was a very considerable sacrifice for war veterans who love the old Polish Army songs and who very rarely get to see them performed by a professional company. Still, we would have to forgo the pleasure.

Reservations were enhanced when huge posters arrived unsolicited from the promoters. The English promoters of the tour had decided that the key image on the poster would be a huge Polish Eagle. Not only was it, being uncrowned, a communist eagle but also it was the wrong colour. Instead of the Polish white the eagle had been coloured in a striking shade of communist red! Anyone doubting the seriousness with which émigré Poles approached matters of colour should know that our flag is always described as 'white and red' and NEVER 'red and white'! The posters therefore really did add insult to injury!

However, I was tempted. I had heard my father sing those songs. I had heard battered records and tapes. I wanted to hear those songs sung properly. Quietly I set about luring Henry astray. As I had anticipated it was not exactly difficult! Soon we had laid our plans. Henry, Jane, Fran and I had our tickets. We would go by car. As the Poles were not going, they would not know that we had broken ranks. Afterwards we would party on into the night at our house. Everything was set.

A few days later I wandered into the Club only to be confronted by the offending 'Red Eagle' poster and alongside it a list inviting everyone to sign up the all-inclusive coach trip to see 'Orzeł Biały' in Birmingham! Zygmunt and Edmund were rather evasive about the change of heart - "Well, it won't really hurt and no-one else will know - and anyway we all need a little entertainment". In the circumstances I thought that their remarks, when they discovered that we already had tickets and had arranged to go by car, were rather uncalled for!

On the night we arrived at the Theatre to find it completely full of Poles. Every Polish community in the Midlands was well represented. Everyone it seemed had had exactly the same 'change of heart'. It was a glorious evening with all the old Polish Army songs from the early

Middle Ages to the Second World War performed by the choir in great style complete with the uniforms, arms and banners of each period. The proceedings were further enlivened by interludes of folk, court and highland dancing breathtakingly performed again in full costume. The audience was entranced. When, however, a brilliant ballet 'in honour of our Warsaw Pact allies' was received with icy resentment while a rendition of The 'First Brigade', the long banned anthem of Piłsudski's Legions, was received with an ecstatic and prolonged standing ovation the Choir got the message. The young officer introducing each item, until then in slightly stilted English, advanced to the very front edge of the stage stepping over the foot lights in order to actually see the audience clearly. "O.K." he said, "so how many of you are Poles?" Confronted by the enthusiastic uproar he grinned, waved, shouted "Czesc" ('Hi) and when the tumult died down proceeded to announce the rest of the evening's proceedings in Polish.

At the end small children from the Polish community in Birmingham turned out in Polish national costume poured on to the stage to present flowers to the singers and dancers. The Birmingham community had clearly an even better prepared 'change of heart' than the rest of us!

As a little provincial grouping the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign was anxious to play a part in the wider national movement in support of Solidarność. Not only did we want to play our part but we also needed guidance and direction. Initially we stumbled across the Polish Solidarity Campaign whose name we in fact adapted so that we became the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign. Throughout the 1980s we continued to affiliate to P.S.C. but increasingly with less and less enthusiasm.

We had reservations from the word go because we came from very different roots. They were a national organisation deeply rooted in the Trade Union Movement and the Labour Party. Their attempts to accommodate others, however well-intentioned on their part, always struck us as stilted and half-hearted. Our roots were different. With a small Polish community and a small-town provincial base in order to be effective we had to be all embracing. The active support of the local branch of the Polish Ex-Combatants Association was vital to us but to be publicly credible we had to have the support of ALL the mainstream British political parties in the area. Local Labour and Conservative politicians who normally hated my guts were marvellous in the deep and unreserved warmth and generosity of their support. As a well-known local Liberal Councillor, I had to learn to adapt. I had to fall over backwards to welcome Tory and Labour support. There was an

unwritten, but to me totally clear, law that I must never exploit their support for my own Party ends. I stuck to that come what may.

If P.S.C. seemed to us to be very partisan in their outlook we were far more worried about their inherent attitude to decision making. I am sure that they would say they were simply democratic. We saw it differently. It seemed to us as if whenever they were faced by new developments in Poland, they appeared to want to form a working party to organise a meeting to consider organising a Rally. To us that was typical of Labour Party organisation and failure at that period. Much later on I developed a healthy respect and, I hope, a good working relationship with Wiktor Moszczyński then with P.S.C. and subsequently the most innovative and intelligent 'young' driving force in the Polish community in London. Back then, however, we wanted something else. We craved immediate response. We craved action. For a committed democrat, maybe that is a blot on my record but I thought that the time for action had come and bluntly I was not above cutting the odd corner or two.

That will, of course, upset Tadek Jarski or to give him his real name Tadeusz Jarzembowski. You see Tadek will tell you that he was, and still is, of course a complete and total democrat. I will not argue with him. Perhaps we could compromise by agreeing that Tadek is a democrat who moves with the speed of lightning!

I do not remember meeting Tadek. I have no recollection of one on the few landmark moments in my existence. All I know is that I met Tadek Jarski. Maybe he paused between cigarettes and more important conversations to shake my hand. I cannot remember.

Tadek is extraordinary. He is a great-hearted Pole whose love for his country, family and friends knows no bounds. He is exciting, knowledgeable, dangerous, frustrating, infuriating, and totally captivating all at the same time! I think he had arrived in the U.K. desperate to fight alongside the Hungarians against the Russians in 1956. Across the intervening years he had intensified his resolve for the ultimate struggle with communism. He tried initially to work within the tight constitutional framework of P.S.C. but they were not happy bedfellows. Very quickly after the imposition of Martial Law he formed 'Solidarity with Solidarity'.

Led by Tadek, SwS was fast and proactive. Every opportunity was used and exploited without delay. Tadek was forceful, demanding and completely unstoppable. Wandering around the office he dramatically and impatiently churned out new schemes and ideas while smoking foul smelling 'Mores' cigarettes. He would have one in his mouth, one

in his hand, and several others on standby already lit in the ashtrays scattered around the place.

He was totally unreasonable but he got results!

Contrary to subsequent malicious reports SwS was not a berserk autocracy built upon the cult of Tadek Jarski. He was surrounded by people who were as single minded as he was. It was a democratic organisation but it got on with the job. Of course, Tadek upset everyone in sight. I don't think that the S.P.K. nationally were exactly amused and the Government-in-exile must have hated him. A late Minister in the Government-in-exile, knowing that I have a soft spot for Tadek, once chided me, "That Tadek, Oh, that Tadek, he descends upon us like some enormous force from the great primeval Polish forests. He sweeps us away in some great storm and then he expects us to be grateful." The Polish establishment in London must have found him utterly intolerable. I loved him.

I still love him.

Throughout the 1980s on the 13th every month (Martial Law having been declared on 13th December 1981), he organised demonstrations outside the Polish Embassy in London.

Tadek has a great heart and it beats for Poland! He taught me that violence is futile. He taught me that anger must be challenged in order to become effective. He taught me to use wit and humour to render the enemy helpless. He taught me to 'damn passive sympathy'. Solidarity with Solidarity led by Tadek steered and guided us.

Tadek's visits to Kidderminster were an all too rare treat for us! So what had happened to me? Although technically a member of the national committee of Solidarity with Solidarity I was in Kidderminster while everyone else was in London. It was difficult to justify the cost of constant rail trips to and from London so we mainly communicated by telephone. Once after a late-night telephone conversation I had just replaced the received when I heard a slight clicking sound coming from our phone. I picked it up and heard a snatch of what was clearly the conversation that I had just had with Tadek! A quick check revealed that this was not the result of aberrant behaviour by either our telephone or Tadek's. We were being bugged! Thereafter Tadek and I would occasionally sprinkle our telephone conversations with cryptic references to supposed grandiose plans for bombings, assassinations and insurrection! We were careful about what we seriously discussed. I have not the foggiest idea who was listening in or what they made of it. I hope that it made them very happy.

Much later I was told that a voluminous intelligence file in Warsaw was stuffed with copies of my 'Focus' newsletters. 'Focus' is the monthly newsletter, which we distribute to every household in the Ward we represent as Councillors. It is concerned with such exciting international issues as local parking problems, refuse collection, the condition of road and pavement surfaces and local vandalism - in short, the day-to-day goings on of an ordinary little English community. The copies that ended up in Warsaw arrived I was informed, although I have no way of confirming, thanks to the kindly efforts of the local Police force in Kidderminster. I was deeply touched by their apparent concern for my welfare. I like to fantasize about an imaginary senior Polish intelligence officer, or better still his Russian boss, hunched over his desk in the depth of the night trying to decipher the true meaning and significance of stories headed 'Bin Mess Scandal', 'On The Buses', or 'Slurry Seal is no Answer to Pavement Problem'. In reality of course probably no-one bothered to look at them. Never mind. Just think of all the time and effort that went into collecting them in Kidderminster, passing them to London, handing them to the Poles, sending them to Warsaw and filing them away. Clearly this was time and money well spent!

In due course Tadek decided that I should become The Director of the Midland Office of Solidarity with Solidarity while of course continuing as Chairman of the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign. With my shiny new title, I happily issued press releases and sent out letters on gleaming new letterheads. We were taken seriously. I was soon spending long hours on press and media releases, briefings and interviews.

As we talked intently on the telephone, I often wondered what the journalists thought they were dealing with? Did they imagine a hectic office full of intense young Polish émigrés chain smoking and no doubt knocking back the odd vodka or five while churning out leaflets and press releases, organising events and demonstrations, and lobbying heads of state? From such comments as "can you get your staff to let me have…", "maybe your p.a. can come back to me" and "could your research department help us with…" I suspect that they were happily so deluded. In fact, there was just one man - me - with a grandiose title, a letterhead, a telephone, a typewriter (remember them?), an overactive imagination and constant encouragement from Tadek! The trick is to sound self-confident and convincing and to skilfully avoid shattering the illusion. I learnt, as my grandfather had sung as he marched with the First Brigade some seventy years before, that 'to want to do something is to be able to do it!' I was learning a lot from Tadeusz Jarzembowski. I was by now well and truly leading a triple

existence. I was employed full time as a teacher. I was a hard-working County and District Councillor fighting to represent my local community. On top of that I was working flat out for the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign and Solidarity with Solidarity. Fran was also a full-time teacher and a committed District Councillor. Increasingly she too was drawn into the Polish community and Polish activism.

I had never been very religious. Like many people I had always had some sort of vague believe that there was 'something out there' but I had never thought it through. In the early 1980s I began to think about religion more often and at the same time I seemed to be continually coming across Father Peter McKenna -at that time the parish priest at St. Wulstan's in Stourport-on-Seven. Father Peter took me in hand and guided me through to my reception into the Roman Catholic Church. It was not for me a complicated rite of passage. I knew before I approached Father McKenna what it was I already wanted to do. This is not to diminish his role in my conversion. On the contrary although I knew what I wanted to do I could not have managed without him. His kindness, intelligence, rigour and gentleness have left a permanent mark on me.

For me it was also in a way a double conversion. At a spiritual level I was making my peace with God and declaring my faith. In another way it was also a matter of establishing my identity. To turn to the Roman Catholic faith was also for me a return to family roots - to Polish roots. I was becoming more Polish.

During the 1980s more Polish books were becoming available in English translation as interest in events in Poland grew. Marion Brandy's 'Warsaw Diary' was a dramatic insight into life in intellectual Warsaw during and following Martial Law. Of even greater significance for me was the arrival of English translations of the books of Tadeusz Konwicki. Konwicki's central character or persona is often that of an apparently ordinary person who carries with him the personal baggage of everyday experience and an ordinary collection of personal flaws, weaknesses and preoccupations. He is however very slightly out of step and 'out of sync with the world around him. He is an outsider who, whatever he does, can never be totally a part of the world rushing about its business around him. Seeing too clearly its absurdities and insanities he is condemned to remain forever slightly removed and at a distance.

His central character is often a disguised and adapted version of himself. In 'A Dream Book for our Time' (1963) there is a superficial normality but all of the characters are carrying with them ghosts from

their own pasts from which they can only intermittently pretend to escape. The central figure is now the ultimate outsider locked on the brink or maybe in the throes of a nervous breakdown. He is haunted by his own wartime failures and by the ghosts of the earlier failure of the 1863 uprising. Even the location in which the characters are trapped is coming apart waiting to be flooded to make way for an enormous new reservoir. I can only read 'A Dream Book for our Time' in morning sunlight. If I read it at night, it haunts my sleep as a constantly repeating nightmare – an endless loop of unresolved terror - from which I eventually awake sweating and exhausted.

In 'The Polish Complex' (1977) Konwicki places himself in a Christmas Eve queue outside a Warsaw jeweller's shop. It is during the communist period. The shelves are empty. There are rumours of the arrival of a consignment of gold rings. All that eventually arrives is Russian electric Samovars! Konwicki watches the queue - their interplay, particular characteristics and differing views of the world. They are strangely aware both of his past and his status as an outsider. Their reaction to him pushes him into reflecting about his wartime past and his subsequent experiences.

In 'A Minor Apocalypse' (1979) the world around him is coming unhinged and is running on its own insane logic. Konwicki reflects on the madness around him as his friends' endeavour, with uncaring but relentless conviction, to convince him to set fire to himself as a public protest against the communist system.

At his most autobiographical in 'New World Avenue and its Environs' (1986) he reflects upon his past and upon his present and upon the Warsaw around him but although he has spent the post-war decades in Warsaw he sees it still through the eyes of a perpetual outsider - a boy from 'the Vilna colony'. On Konwicki's 'Nowy Świat' (New World Avenue) only the cat Ivan views the world with total ease and self-confidence and even his motives are suspect.

'Moonrise, Moonset' (1982) is a personal memoir of confession and gossip and a speculative essay on Poland's love-hate relationship with Russia in the context of his personal patented 1981 ending in the declaration of Martial Law and the suppression of Solidarność.

In 'Bohin Manor' (1986) he imagines his own grandmother's life in a fantasy set in Lithuanian backwoods haunted by the uneasy presence of the past and dark visions of the future. A man-eating monster named Schicklgruber haunts the woods as a warning of the Hitler still to come. The local police chief is a Georgian named Dzhugashvili while the heroine gives a lift in her coach to a serious little boy named Józef

Piłsudski. There is a premonition of forthcoming tragedy and a day of reckoning.

Konwicki has been described as “the master of symbolic codes, of morality tales disguised as hallucinations” who speaks “of his own and his nation’s tribal memory”.

Konwicki’s stance as an outsider to the Poland around him and his perpetual attempt, which he knows is doomed, to unravel, understand and explain the Polish experience makes him the essential writer of the late twentieth century for all ‘outsiders’ trying to understand at least a little about Poland and those strange Poles.

We were of course aware that communist Poland was heading nowhere. We had indeed got used to the idea. The economy was stagnant and Jaruzelski had no solution to the political and economic impasse around him. We did not however foresee the fall of communism. For decades Polish émigrés had said with total conviction “Yes, of course Poland will be free” only to add the mournful rider “but not in my lifetime”. We too were infected with this attitude. We assumed that as old men we would still be campaigning for Polish freedom and looking to hand on the torch to yet another generation. It was our life’s work and we could see no end to it.

The sudden collapse of communism in Poland following upon the ‘round table talks’ between Wałęsa and his colleagues and the communists took our breath away. That this was achieved without violence was nothing short of miraculous. It was however a strange ‘victory’. On the night of Wałęsa’s eventual Presidential triumph we held a party at the Polish Club in Kidderminster. The joy was mingled with tears. There were tears for the suffering of the past and tears of joy for re-born freedom. But there were also tears of loss and the realisation of the irreversibility of that loss. Most of the Polish community in the U.K. came from the old east of Poland annexed into the Soviet Union by Stalin when he shunted all of Poland’s borders westwards at the end of World War II.

“When will Poland be Poland?” they used to ask. To which the answer was “When you can fly from Wilna to Lwów on an internal Polish flight and the stewardess offers you Wedel (no longer July 22nd) chocolates)”!

For our wartime Poles in the U.K. their towns and villages have long been absorbed, along with Lviv and Vilna, into Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. To welcome the new independent Poland was also to recognise that those lands in the east - the ‘kresy’ - were gone forever.

Wedel by the way are the providers of chocolate to the Polish nation. Under Communism their packaging had the 'July 22nd' tag as a reminder of the establishment of the hated post-war communist Lublin government at the end of World War II. In the 1990s Wedel were to be bought up by Coca Cola. Subsequently possession passed to Cadbury-Schweppes. Such are the ways of our global post-Soviet world!

The newly elected President Wałęsa came to England on an official state visit. Like every other self-respecting Polish community in the U.K. we hired a coach and headed for Windsor where Wałęsa was to be a guest of the Queen. As we entered Windsor we saw long banners hanging down the lamp columns. Half of them were huge long elongated union jacks. However, every second column bore a long banner in white and red resplendently bearing a huge white Polish eagle surmounted by a golden crown.

In an act of gross arrogance and folly the post-war Polish communists had removed the crown from the eagle. For them the crown was a symbol of outdated nationalism. For everyone else it is a symbol of Polish independence, self-respect and historical continuity. For post-war Poles the absence of the crown from the eagle was a daily reminder of their subjugation to Moscow.

The older Poles on our coach were near to tears.

Later I was at the Polish Embassy in order to hear Wałęsa. For a decade I had sat from time to time numbing my backside on the chilly stones at the base of a British equestrian statue outside the Polish Embassy in Portland Street at yet another of Tadek's demonstrations. I had never been inside the building.

Now we were ushered inside. The walls were covered with tapestries bearing the crowned eagle. On the landing stood a huge bust of Marshal Józef Piłsudski the hero of pre-war Poland for so long written out of the history books of the post-war 'People's Republic'.

We crowded into an upstairs reception room and sipped chilled white sparkling wine scarcely able to believe where we were or what we were doing.

Noticing my near empty glass, a 'wine waiter' who turned out to be a Consul approached as, "Ah, Mr Oborski would you like some more wine?" Gratefully taking the proffered glass I asked "But how do you know my name?" "Well" he said, "in the old days I sometimes had to record your demonstrations outside this Embassy. Those holes in the window frame are where we ran the cable so that we could put out a microphone to record you and see", he said turning and pointing, "that

microphone which our President will shortly be using is the same microphone with which we used to record you."

Emboldened by his willingness to talk I enquired, "So how exactly do you feel about the changes in Poland?" He paused for a moment and then said, "0.K., you want an honest answer so I'll try to give you one. I was young, well-educated and ambitious and I needed a 'Party Card' in order to get on. I'm not proud of it. It was simply what one did. For me it's like this. Before we were just a subsidiary of a larger foreign company. Today we work for ourselves – just for Poland". Later I came to know him well and I have no reason to doubt his words.

Our welcome to the inside of the Embassy seemed even more surreal because of the bizarre events that had enveloped us in the final slow decay of the communist government in Warsaw.

At some point Tadek had learnt that the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, intended to visit Poland. Tadek was anxious to discover her detailed intentions. After talking to me he approached then Wyre Forest Conservative M.P. Anthony Coombes. When it came to local Wyre Forest politics Anthony and I were always on opposite sides. On Polish matters he was, however, always extremely helpful and supportive. Indeed, the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign had presented Anthony with a small, framed certificate as an expression of gratitude when he tabled an Early Day motion on human rights in Poland in the House of Commons. Anthony agreed to write to the Foreign Office to seek elucidation about the objectives set for Mrs. Thatcher's visit to Warsaw.

The reply was stunning. There was to be no overtly political content to the visit and certainly no major speech. She would meet Jaruzelski and attend a dinner. Whatever Thatcher's intentions we knew exactly what would happen. She would be filmed glad handing Jaruzelski and dining with him. The film would be used on Polish television to imply British support for the Polish regime. The letter of response from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office was not actually marked confidential. Tadek used the content to provoke editorial comment in The Times and in serious papers in the U.S.A., France, Germany and the Vatican. In each case the resulting editorial content can be crudely summarised as "what the hell does the woman think she's doing going to Warsaw without taking the opportunity to deliver a strong message on human rights in Poland? If she doesn't do that then the rats in the Polish regime will simply misrepresent her visit as support for their rotten set up". Subsequently Tadek told me that Anthony had been approached by the Foreign Office. As he had raised the matter of the content of her visit and given the bad press it was attracting what

suggestions would he make for the content of a speech in Warsaw? Needless to say, Tadek had plenty of ideas on the subject no all of which could be reasonably submitted to a Conservative British Prime Minister. However, Anthony did submit a list of key points that he had agreed with Tadek.

Mrs. Thatcher duly arrived in Warsaw and was seen on Polish television presenting an unexpectedly political speech hammering home the case for greater protection of human rights in Poland!

We celebrated quietly but I was left with a disturbing thought. If this major speech had come about in this peculiarly hit and miss manner how exactly did all her other major foreign policy speeches take shape? The mind, as they say, boggles!

With Jaruzelski's return visit to London events turned ever more outlandish. By that stage the Embassy was pleading with Tadek to stop tormenting them. Reform they said was on the horizon so it was time for us to halt our protests.

That would not have been Tadek's way!

The response to Jaruzelski's arrival in London involved several organisations. When he went to lay a wreath on the grave of Polish wartime leader General Sikorski at Newark he was met by a dignified demonstration by veterans of the S.P.K. (Polish Ex-Combatants Association). I was told that barely had he laid the wreath than it was removed by a be-medalled Polish veteran while a Priest duly blessed the recently polluted grave. The symbolism had been very clear indeed.

In London we were awaiting Jaruzelski's arrival later that day for a reception at the Polish Embassy. We were planning a particularly warm welcome. As we waited, we speculated idly as to whether or not a young man in jeans and sweater with a rucksack leaning against a barrier near the Embassy was in fact what he seemed or was indeed with Polish security. "Let's see" said Tadek and nudged his son. Marek slid off and made his way circuitously and unnoticed around the back of the crowd to emerge near the lad in question. They exchanged a few words and the young man walked away. Marek grinned, gave a thumbs up sign and ran back to join us. "What did you say?" I asked. "Simple" said Marek "I went up to him and said in Polish I know I'm early but they've sent me out to relieve you now'!"

As the crowd grew, I was one of the 'warm up' speakers. I wondered if the banner was a little over the top but as my fellow speaker - a distinguished Czech cleric - appeared not to mind it seemed churlish to

query it. The banner proclaimed in large letters “JARUZELSKI GO HOME - TO HELL”!

When the General’s car arrived the crowd duly booed and hissed. Tadek had ensured the presence of an enormously powerful, that is to say unbearably loud but nevertheless perfectly clear, PA system. He had not been holding monthly demonstrations on this spot for best part of a decade for nothing! The Police were so happy that we never caused any trouble that they were not interested in a little high-volume fun.

Jaruzelski got out of the car to hear resounding clearly above the din the opening words of a Polish military court martial indictment. Standing behind barriers in the middle of the road we were separated from him by the width of two car lanes. Furious he spun round to glare at us. Having peered at us for a moment he spun on his heel and stormed into the Embassy.

The reception was held in the large room which fronts onto both Portland Street and Weymouth Street. It looked out straight over Tadek’s demonstration. The room was crowded. The night was hot. The windows were open. Tadek now introduced a Polish singer complete with guitar, who swiftly settled into his repertoire to the great delight of the Polish speaking sections of the crowd. The British police were delighted at the relaxed happiness of the crowd. O.K. the volume was turned up to full blast but if that kept the crowd so relaxed and happy then that was fine by the police. They were not aware of the content of the Polish lyrics. Needless to say, the songs had plenty to say about the situation in Poland in general and about Jaruzelski in particular. If the noise outside was loud it was, I was later told by a sympathetic victim, utterly intolerable within to such an extent that it drowned out Jaruzelski’s prepared address. Apparently, some of the guests found it increasingly difficult to keep a straight face.

We finished the evening happily consuming pints of first-rate British beer at the Dover Castle which is the truly wonderful pub located just at the back of the Embassy in a little mews off Weymouth Street.

Today, when I occasionally attend functions at the Embassy, I always manage to find time for a quick drink in the Dover Castle. It is for me still an essential ‘tip of the hat’ to Tadek and the old days.

I cannot leave the 1980s without remembering P.P.P.. This was an attempt to create an organisation for the Polish Post-War Generation. In a way it was always doomed to failure. We were already in our 40s so in no other structure than the émigré Polish community could we

have been described, as we often were, as young! I sometimes felt that some our elders and betters probably secretly thought that we should still have been in short trousers. We were the small rump of the post war generation. We were the ones who had stayed close to the community or who, like me, had drifted in more recently.

Others of course were deeply involved but I will always associate P.P.P. with Ewa and Kazek Breszka. Kazek was a larger-than-life character, who played an enormously influential role in Medical Aid for Poland. Sadly, he was to die in 1996. He was a forceful and erudite man who spoke with powerful conviction. He did not suffer fools gladly and was not afraid to be outspoken. I admired his bluntness, his Polish patriotism and his work rate. He was also extremely warm hearted and generous. Ewa is very special. Although of the post-war generation, she has that old-world Polish charm in abundance. She could charm the birds out of the trees. She has certainly charmed various senior irate Polish community leaders into unexpected compromises and reconciliations. She is also as the Americans might say 'one smart cookie'. She is intellectually rigorous, hard-working, totally committed to the Polish community and utterly charming.

P.P.P. had for me, despite Ewa's best efforts, two critical flaws.

Firstly, we were too few and too late. All the power and 'clout' is locked into the senior structures and organisations in the Polish community particularly the S.P.K. (Polish Ex-Combatants Association) and the Church (with the Federation of Poles in Great Britain, of which more later, increasingly becoming a major player throughout the 1990s). This is not a criticism. They have earned their pre-eminence through decades of dedicated and highly effective hard work and total dedication. It just doesn't leave very much room for upstarts! Secondly, it was locked into what I thought to be a sterile and continuous debate about 'what does it mean to be Polish?' For a lot of second-generation Polish speakers it may have been a useful debate. I found it deeply frustrating preferring action to debate. It is now rather ironic that I am writing a book about my own relationship with Polishness' in order to try to reinvigorate such a debate. Maybe the P.P.P. debates got through to me after all.

Perhaps at this point I should mention at last my language problem. At school I failed totally at languages. Failed attempts at French at the age of eleven (of which the only highlight was a 'the budgie ate my French vocabulary book' excuse saga) were followed by total disaster with 'O' Level Latin and German in the Sixth Form. I have no talent in that direction. I am also substantially deaf in my right ear following an inner ear infection thirty years ago. In English I can bluff and lip read.

As I write this, I know that I must go to the doctor and get it sorted. The brilliant Ewa Mahey struggles to teaches me Polish during our evening course at Kidderminster College. Fran is a first-rate pupil. With little aptitude, deafness and too much work on my plate as Council Leader and Polish Consul I am the pupil from Hell. I must reform!

Not speaking Polish has not always been a handicap. Sometimes it works the other way. If I cannot speak Polish then I cannot be lured onto this side or that side in any community argument. Indeed, when I speak in English on Polish affairs to an English speaking Polish audience I get immediate applause. I am the dog applauded for trying to walk upright on two legs. I am not being applauded for the awful performance. I am being applauded simply for even trying in the first place!

One particular P.P.P. excursion is particularly worthy of recall for less than creditable reasons. They organised a weekend at Fenton - the Polish Centre beloved of Polish Scouts, Guides and War Veterans. The accommodation rudimentary. Wind rushed through the 'army huts' at night. We slept in sleeping bags on hard wooden boards. Our War Veterans, hardened in the heat of battle, apparently love reunions in the conditions of their youth.

Henry and I had sat through a long afternoon of debate. At some stage it was decided to open the bar. The gentleman running the bar was elderly and extremely slow moving. The queue was accordingly slow-moving and somewhat impatient. A newfound friend who is an extremely distinguished member of the Polish community in the U.K. solved the problem by purchasing a half-bottle of Scotch and six beers for the three of us. The perfect way to avoid repeated queuing. When it came to my round, I purchased the same. Henry then did likewise. Each of us had now drunk six pints of bitter and half a bottle of Scotch before 5.00pm! After supper there was to be some form of entertainment but our friend suggested instead that we "go for a drink". I do not remember that walk. I cannot remember the pub. I do not remember the walk back. By the time we got back the bar at the Polish centre had been drunk dry. Fortunately, and I use the word 'fortunately' in the sense that one might say, "fortunately the Black Death arrived", someone had a large case of home-made wine. The taste was closer to classic toilet cleaner than to classic Bordeaux! Alas, we drank it nevertheless!

Henry and I retired to 'bed'. We shared a wooden base and huddled together for warmth although separated in respective sleeping bags. At some stage in the night, we were awoken by something of a commotion. In the light of day, it emerged that one of our befuddled

colleagues having arisen to a call of nature and having totally lost his sense of direction had eventually mistakenly done the deed over his next-door neighbour. This explained his injuries, which were evident next morning at breakfast. At around 6.00am I regained consciousness only to be aware of the freezing cold and Henry ramming a passing bottle of vodka between my chattering teeth. Henry is remarkably reticent when it comes to talking about the events of that night.

Breakfast was a cheerfully greasy British fry up with bacon and eggs awash in their own grease accompanied by passing vodka bottles. Our friend of the previous day was bright eyed and vigorous. His young wife and small child were with him. As Henry and I awaited the merciful release of a by now rather overdue joint burial he explained that he and his wife and child had to return to London without delay as his two previous wives were preparing for his eldest son's thirty-fifth birthday party! He certainly had our admiration. Neither Henry nor I made it to Mass that Sunday morning!

As I have said in one sense P.P.P. failed completely. It did. It failed to sustain and develop as an organisation. As I have also said that failure was in my view inevitable. In another way it succeeded totally. Many of its members have subsequently taken their place as leaders of their local Polish communities and indeed in the running of national organisations.

For me as well things would move on and once again in an unexpected direction!

3. TAKING THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

By the Spring of 1989 I was very nearly 43 years old and I had never been to Poland.

In the 1950s I was too young. In the 1960s and 1970s such things never entered our heads. In the 1980s I was embroiled in support of Solidarność. A colleague, at a similar lowly level in pro-Solidarity activity in Switzerland had been welcomed in Poland with a prison cell. His supposed crimes included possession of a typewriter and rather strangely taking a photograph of the inside of the prison in which he was duly interred for that offence. As he could not actually have taken the photograph prior to his actual imprisonment on the charge of taking it his circumstances were to say the least improbable unless he had previously had access to a time machine!

The Swiss Government eventually purchased his release. I did not go to Poland. Mrs Thatcher was not the sort of lady to purchase my release at any price!

By the Summer of 1989 things were changing. My younger brother, Nick, had already been to Poland. It was time now for me to go to Poland at last. I do not know what I expected. I hoped for much and I expected little. I found everything.

We hurtled across Europe in a battered gold Renault. The journey across West Germany was uneventful. In those days the western world ended at the endearing and historic little market town of Helmstedt where we stayed at the convenient, cosy and accommodating Park Hotel. We have since stayed there on many occasions. It is worthy of discovery.

The next morning, we searched Helmstedt in order to find a pineapple. Such luxuries were not then for Poles and my cousin Wojtek was desperate for fresh supplies. We also took such basics as coffee, tooth paste and toilet paper. Heinz Tomato Ketchup and Colman's Mustard powder were also on Wojtek's list of necessary requirements.

At the East German border, we queued and eventually saw our papers disappear down some little tube - reminiscent of such systems in London stores, though from the 1930s into the 1950s - leaving us temporarily unknown and unidentified. Eventually the paperwork returned but not before the bored East German guard had aimlessly and pointlessly bounced the barrel of his Kalashnikov on our bonnet. The advice at that time was to hit the pedal and get across East Germany as quickly as possible and if necessary, with your knees crossed. We did exactly that. The East Germans on the Polish border

were rude, boorish and truculent - living up to their international reputation. The Poles by contrast were cheerful, relaxed and polite. Having discovered that Fran had been at one stage a biology teacher the Polish customs officer happily conversed on the life style of butterflies!

We sailed on into a Poland, which had at that time what can only be described as an air of dusty dilapidation and total inertia. It was as if the place had decayed for decades while nobody did anything. That of course is a gross oversimplification. The post-war regime had struggled to develop industry and to provide cheap and cheerful system-built blocks of flats but their energies had long since been exhausted. Main roads, in so far as they existed, were in a pitiful condition, only marginally better than the total dilapidation of minor roads. Houses, shops and industrial premises quietly decayed without proper maintenance.

By this time my father was doing 'serious business' in Poland on a regular basis. He had insisted upon personally obtaining our visas. Today visas are a thing of the past for U.K. citizens visiting Poland for trips of up to six months and likewise for Poles visiting U.K. In those days they were a highly frustrating inconvenience. We did not at first fully comprehend my father's generosity.

In those days the British Pound could be exchanged at various rates of exchange by banks, kantors (private banks), hotels and black-market guys (who offered the best rates so long as you were sure that you were getting real Polish notes and not bundles of newsprint between two outer genuine notes). As part of their impossible mission to support the failing Polish Złoty the Polish authorities forced western visitors to exchange a fixed amount daily at a truly exorbitant and outrageous rate of exchange. Dick Turpin would have loved it.

This was highway robbery made well and truly easy.

My father had however had our passports stamped in Polish with those marvellous words of the period 'exempt from duty of currency control'. We were the privileged. We were about to be rich. We did not need to exchange currency at a crooked official rate. To all extents and purposes for the duration of our visit we were to be millionaires!

Realisation started to dawn on the Poznań by-pass. A motorcycle cop had placed himself at the top of an incline sweeping out of an underpass. It was impossible not to exceed the speed limit and yet still overcome the incline. He was evidently doing very good business. He was not so lucky with Fran. She had no Złoty nor even appropriate German currency or dollars. He was turning ugly. Only then did he

look at our passports. Suddenly the balance of power turned from him to us. He was faced by a pair of scruffy westerners driving a wreck. However, they had this coveted passport stamp identifying them as people of importance to the continuing well-being of the Polish state. He destroyed the form he was filling in and wished us none too kindly upon our way.

For us the various exchange rates remained on that trip a total mystery. My Aunt Wiska would examine the exchange rates carefully before my cousin Wojtek set about more rewarding business on the black market. They were I think amused by our Western ignorance of such complexities.

We stayed on that first trip with Wiska and Wojtek at the family flat on Targowa on the Praga side of the Vistula river. The family had purchased the flat upon its construction in 1916 for occupation by my newlywed grandparents in 1919. The family has roosted there ever since. Like all surviving old Warsaw buildings, it shows the scars of World War II and the subsequent decades of enforced neglect. Yet, despite all those trials and alterations it fills me with awe as I try to imagine its real magnificence when a young Polish army officer and his bride arrived there for the first time in 1919.

The Poland in which we were arriving in the Summer of 1989 was a strange and mysterious place for us. Nothing seemed to be quite what it should. Nothing quite made sense. Today we take for granted and laugh at the science fiction convention and conundrum of the parallel universe. Yet in 1989 Poland could truly have been in a different universe.

Shortly after our arrival in Warsaw we took my aunt, my cousin and his then girlfriend, Gosia, to lunch at the Hotel Europejski. We queued very briefly. It was one of the few places where you could actually get a decent meal or even find a table. As we entered my relatives must have been chatting in Polish because the waitress immediately assured my cousin that of course no wine was available. When she returned to take our orders, we must have been conversing in English. Suddenly awaking to our true potential as customers she rapidly whispered in Wojtek's ear "How are your friends planning to pay?" Wojtek replied with the single magic word "Dollars".

We enjoyed aperitifs. We enjoyed a superb three-course meal. We drank Russian champagne followed by quite acceptable French red wine. We sipped coffee. We left a huge tip. That total bill came to the marvellous sum of £8.00. At a later stage in our trip, we were happily installed in the historic city of Kraków, on the eleventh floor or a ten-floor block of flats. Yes, that is possible - but only in Poland.

On our first night in Kraków Wojtek suddenly announced that the time was right to teach us communism. Wojtek, Gosia, Fran and I set out by taxi. The taxi driver appeared to be delighted at the concept. We then drove from hotel to hotel and restaurant to restaurant. We covered the city. The Head Waiter at each establishment dutifully explained that the restaurant was full and that every table was occupied. This was interesting in view of the fact that it was perfectly obvious that, wherever we went, virtually every table was completely unoccupied. Eventually our highly amused taxi driver returned us to the hotel from which we had started. Wojtek paid him off. “Mike” said my cousin “can you spare just ten dollars please?” I handed over the note. He sauntered off to discuss matters with the very same Head Waiter who had refused us a table earlier in the evening. A few moments later we were seated at a table in a huge, near empty restaurant. We were being served Russian Champagne and good French red wine. The food was superb. The violinists loitered by our table. In those days the restaurants were state owned. They generally made an enormous loss. Every meal served added to the loss and so it was only safe to serve big dollar tippers whose contribution might just offset the risks of redundancy if the establishment made a loss too far.

My cousin later told me that in remoter areas of the Soviet Union restaurants closed for lunch and for dinner in order to accommodate mealtimes for restaurant staff!

Unusually for me this first trip to Poland was substantially free of alcohol. The reason being that alcohol was in incredibly short supply. Much of the time it was available only for U.S. dollars in the Pewex shops created especially to remove much needed foreign currency from foreign visitors. Wine was an appalling price, if available at all, and generally consisted of sweet Russian champagne, rejects from the Bordeaux wine trade or sickly Bulgarian ‘Sophia’. Dining out in Kazimierz Dolny we actually poured a full bottle of Rumanian red wine down the toilet and insisted upon Coca Cola instead! The wine had it is fair to say come in a glass bottle rubber stamped rather than labelled and with a screw cap rather than a cork. We were warned.

In Kazimierz Dolny too we discovered a ramshackle makeshift bar doing a really roaring trade. As it had no tables or chairs, we sat on the pavement outside drinking Polish bottled beer under a large sign announcing the prohibition of public drinking.

In a famous Kraków restaurant, the barman cheerfully informed us that the sale of alcohol would be confined to a period starting at 13.00 hours and concluding at precisely 13.05 hours with purchases limited to a single shot of vodka or a single small beer per customer.

In Kraków Market Square we purchased a bottle of Sweet Martini to leave as a present for Wojtek's friends who had kindly lent us their flat. Walking across the square with Fran, to join Gosia and me, Wojtek dropped the flimsy plastic bag containing the bottle.

The precious liquid trickled away over the cobblestones. We returned to the shop in order to purchase a replacement bottle. The shop staff were truly amazed. How had these mad foreigners managed to drink such an expensive bottle in less than one minute? We were clearly both highly adept alcoholics and quite totally mad foreigners.

The 'Stairway to Heaven' was also a salutary reminder as to the realities of communist economics. As far as I can remember the store in which the 'stairway' was located was a five-floor building. The first four floors were dilapidated and virtually devoid of stock. Passage from the ground floor to the first, second, third and fourth floors were by way of sadly dilapidated staircases. The staircases were crumbling and dangerous.

On the fourth floor you were suddenly confronted by a gleaming chrome finished escalator leading to the fifth floor. This was the 'stairway to heaven'. On the beautifully appointed fifth floor there were locked glass cases containing the very best and most expensive goods. Unlike the rest of the store, purchases had to be made in U.S. dollars which were of course only available to foreign visitors or to the party hierarchy.

It was most difficult to work out what was most repugnant - a society divided so ruthlessly between haves and have-nots or the manner in which the privileged flaunted their wealth in the face of the impoverished.

Interestingly, as all transactions were in U.S. dollars small change also needed to be offered in U.S. currency. No such change was available so your change actually arrived in the form of small slips of badly duplicated paper proclaiming itself to be cents or dollars but bearing absolutely no resemblance to the real thing. They were of course only exchangeable in Pewex shops.

Everything was a mystery. In the west we simply took petrol for granted. It was always available. Now we were entirely dependent upon small stockpiles of petrol dotted around the countryside with family, friends, and well-wishers.

Filling stations were very few and far between.

The evil Russian petrol had to be filtered through an old pair of tights. At the end of our trip dirt in the petrol blocked the air vent into

the petrol tank. Unable to draw in air the tank steadily imploded. We eventually limped back across Europe with a steadily decreasing petrol capacity eventually seeking a gallon at a time at every petrol station we passed in order to allow us to stagger home to the U.K.

It was not only the purchase of meals, alcohol and petrol that seemed so strange to us.

While in Kraków we visited the Wawel Hill with its historic Cathedral and the Royal Castle. Having duly toured the Church run Cathedral we queued in order to visit the state-run Castle. As we queued Wojtek wandered off apparently aimlessly. We were about twentieth in the slow-moving queue when, at about 11.00am the ticket sale kiosk was suddenly closed. They had apparently already sold the ticket allocation for the day. To us this was incomprehensible. Why was there a daily ticket quota? The castle was not going anywhere. Why couldn't we go round it?

Ahead of us at the front of the queue a furious American waved a fistful of dollars and screamed "What's wrong with these God damn people? We want to give them money to go round their damn castle and they don't even want to take it!"

My cousin sidled up to us. "Please come with me" he said "but slowly and try to look as if we are not doing anything interesting". We obliged and followed him around the corner. He had, we discovered, noticed a small unlabelled doorway. Venturing inside he had discovered the Conducted Tour Booking Office, which was clearly a very well-kept secret. A conducted tour it emerged consisted of a party of ten people with their very own guide. Strangely the cost of a guided party for ten was considerably less than the total cost of ten single tickets without a guide. Yes, if he could provide a party they would provide a guide and, yes, of course we could proceed without delay.

Quickly and quietly, so not as to attract any attention, which might have caused difficulties, Wojtek duly recruited two young Germans, an Italian couple and two Polish students. With the four of us he now had a party of ten. Triumphantly we entered the building with our helpful, attentive and extremely well-informed guide for a lengthy tour of now otherwise completely and totally empty building.

My Aunt Wiska had proved to be one of the world's greatest cooks. Once she had been duly assured that we really wanted to eat Polish food she unleashed the full magnificence of her culinary repertoire!

If it can possibly be made into a Polish soup then my Aunt Wiska knows exactly and how precisely how to make it into a Polish soup. She can make a Barscz or Chłodnik beyond the imagination of

Ukrainians and Lithuanians. Her dill, cucumber and sorel fruits and her cold fruit soups are beyond imagination! In addition her bigos, pierogi, kapusta, polędwica and cutlets are to kill for. She is a genius!

In 1989 this was particularly important as 'eating out' was regarded as an act of total folly. All restaurants, cafes and bars were state owned. Standards were low and expectations were lower! If you declared an intention to "eat out" the immediate response was "don't do it" followed by "well if you insist have a couple of vodkas to finish - they may kill the germs - If you are lucky".

Undaunted we risked the inevitable consequences of our own folly. I remember with particular anguish a half-consumed beef burger at the Forum in Kraków in 1989. I eventually re-surfaced still shaking and staggering some three days later. One Sunday afternoon we stopped to search for food in Radom. It was not a good idea. In order to serve alcohol for protracted periods 'hotels' and 'bars' had to offer 'food'. For most clients, huge quantities of alcohol accompanied by the occasional packet of crisps met the bill. Against all sensible advice I ordered and ate a 'meat cutlet'. My cousin begged me not to do it. People at neighbouring tables muttered darkly. Even the waiter tried to talk me out of it. When I responded "don't worry, I'll have a shot with it" he disappeared and returned grim faced to deposit in front of me a glass and a whole bottle of vodka! Of course, they were right and I was wrong. Unless you have consumed a meat cutlet in a dilapidated and ill-decorated hotel in Radom in 1989 you can have no possible idea of the damage which a small portion of ill-preserved, ill-prepared and ill-cooked shredded beef can wreak on the human digestive system. All I can say is that I was lucky to have simultaneous unrestricted access to toilet and bucket. If Hell truly exists, then I truly believe that it will hold a special place for one particular self-styled 'chef' from Radom. Of course, it has also occurred to me that if things go badly for me, I may be condemned to an eternity of eating his dishes. It is not always a good idea to reflect upon eternity.

While we are at it let's get all the doom and gloom over in one go. A whole sub-genre of horror literature could be devoted to the public toilets of communist era Poland. Few in number, they were rich in anecdotes and terror. They were often guarded by aged crones who in return for a few coins would grudgingly part with a very small square of coarse textured sandpaper, which they assured you was actually toilet paper. Requests for a second fragment would be greeted by incredulous stares, which spoke volumes of their disdain for the reckless extravagance of western foreigners. Public toilets were foul beyond description. Hotels were the place of choice as toilets were likely to be cleaner and the supply of toilet paper more available.

Nevertheless, it was sensible to travel with supplies of toilet paper if you expected Western luxury in such matters.

Shortages were not simply an outcome of the old communist system. They were also an effective mechanism of social control. People who work long hours and then have to spend further long hours queuing and seeking basic necessities have no time left to discuss let alone organise dissent. Prolonged daily queuing for basic foods such as sausage and bread was still a characteristic of daily life in the Poland of 1989.

Any major domestic accident could cause endless hassles. Let's say you dropped a heavy object into the ancient bathroom washbasin and smashed it beyond repair. There were no washbasins in the shops. You needed to find someone who could introduce you to someone who might be able to 'organise' a new basin. In effect this meant haggling to agree a deal so that it became worthwhile for someone to 'organise' (i.e. steal) the required washbasin from a building site. If you were unlucky the process could take weeks.

The 'Orange Party' found fame for a time as Warsaw's favourite political pranksters. They would plan and organise well in advance for one of the great street parades of the Polish People's Republic, such as May 1st. They would quietly occupy the roof or upper storey of a suitably placed office block. At the appointed hour a substantial supply of otherwise unobtainable goods such as toothpaste and sanitary towels would rain from the skies. Given the choice between either proceeding with dignity, or scuffling for goodies, participants in the parades did the obvious thing. They broke ranks and grabbed what they could as the event around them dissolved into chaos. These 'actions' were particularly galling for the authorities, as to admit their existence was to admit both the extent of shortages and the public demand for the goods in question.

On another occasion West Berlin suddenly experienced a totally unexpected and unprecedented shortage of toothbrushes. Investigations revealed that they had been bought up by a group of Polish telephone engineers dispatched from Warsaw for the purpose. They were to be used in cleaning the filthy and crumbling terminals of the Polish national telephone service.

Polish roads were and indeed still remain narrow, poorly surfaced and inadequate. They were often rutted and pitted to an extent that is indescribable. On the notorious single lane stretch of the Poznań ring road you are still well advised to sit well back if you happen to be stationary behind a heavy lorry at traffic lights in Summer. The reason being that the lorry may not actually come to a stop but may

continually roll backwards and forwards to avoid sinking further into the oozing ruts of melting tarmac. Taken unaware, foreign lorries have been known to wedge briefly in the tarmac ooze. At one point the ruts are so deep that, with a reasonably heavily laden car, it is unwise to drive with wheels at the bottom of the ruts in case the car bottoms out at the deepest points. Rather it is advisable to drive, as the ruts are unavoidable, with the outside edges of tyres taking the weight part way up the sides of the ruts. Goodness knows how much damage this does to tires.

Back in 1989 there seemed to be several quite distinct types of travellers on the endlessly rutted Polish highways. Pedestrians plodded along the roadside to and from the nearest village or bus stop. There were cyclists who appeared to be utterly unaware of the arrival of the motorcar on Polish roads and who were determined to proceed as if these intruders simply did not exist. Drunks on bikes could be easily recognised by their erratic progress and by the bottles from which they were drinking as they rode along. There were horses pulling primitive carts and ancient buses and lorries trundling along belching out smoke and fumes. Slow moving tractors appeared oblivious of the queues of impatient traffic building up behind them.

Cars also came in many types. There was a smattering of modern western vehicles and ancient East German Trabants. Other dilapidated Soviet bloc monstrosities such as Wartburgs, Ladas, Skodas and even ancient Warszawas plodded along. More modern in looks although rather less modern under the bonnet was the home-grown Polonez. The Peugeot 205 was the height of ambition. Dacias (Renault 12s built under licence in Rumania) were also considered quite hot numbers.

Polish roads were however totally dominated by the distinctively Polish vehicle of the period - the Polski Fiat 125. It is with good reason that these heroic vehicles are called ‘maluch’ or in English ‘tiny’. Parked next to a Polish maluch the humble British mini would seem to take on truly gargantuan proportions! The maluch was built under licence in Poland but original Italian imports or early Polish models were preferred to succeeding versions. The older they were the better built they were, went the argument. True pessimists held that the newer the maluch the more unreliable it would be. Only when a newer maluch had been appropriately strengthened by injection of older spare parts would real pessimists finally accept that it was fully fit for the job.

Maluchs were tiny, two door, very, very close to the ground and boasted an impoverished rear mounted engine. Getting into the back was difficult and undignified for even normal sized people. For us

bulkier types it was terrifying. Getting out was even worse. One had nightmares of getting in and then being unable ever to get out again. Early models relied upon a string pull rather than an ignition key. Steering was not self-correcting so if you turned a corner you had to remember to consciously adopt a new course or you would simply complete the circle on which you had embarked. Roadsides were littered with defective maluchs which were often seen being pushed along by forlorn owners. Its diminutive size meant that occasionally four fit young Polish lads could be seen simply carrying the defective vehicle away with them.

Despite obvious limitations the maluch, which appeared to come in every conceivable colour and shade except black, was expected to carry enormous and unlikely loads. We have seen a battered hulk of a maluch trundling along with great bales of hay some four times its own height stacked up on its roof.

This strange phenomenon is now well on the way to disappearing from the still deeply rutted roads of Poland. This Poland of 1989 was indeed a very strange place for Western visitors. On the one hand it seemed to slumber on under decades of dusty decay. On the other hand, we knew perfectly well that this was the place that had produced a priest and an engineer who were changing the world.

By our arrival in Poland the 35% election had taken place. The crumbling communist regime had allowed a bizarre election in which 65% of the seats in the Sejm were reserved for themselves while the other 35% of seats were subject to free election. Amazingly the communists had convinced themselves that they would win most of the 35% of freely contested seats. After all, went the logic, they had the only political organisation and the short election campaign would not give Solidarność time to organise effectively. The short time span of the campaign backfired. Given plenty of time the opposition fragments might have fallen out among themselves over who should fight where so damaging each other's chances. Lack of time meant that everybody in the opposition had no option but to accept hastily imposed lists of candidates. In the event the Solidarność grouping took every single one of the 35% of seats available! Due to the labyrinthine electoral process, which they themselves had created, the communists found it difficult even to cross the hurdles they had set to win the 65% of seats, which they had reserved for themselves. The communists had also reintroduced a second house, the Senate, just in time to watch their opponents win all the seats! 99 seats in the new upper house went to Solidarność while the 100th seat went to a single popular independent.

Although they still held the 65% of the seats, which they had reserved for themselves, in the Sejm the Polish United Workers Party had been utterly morally defeated. Any attempt to continue to try to assert 'the pre-eminence of the party' was now condemned to failure and ridicule and they knew it. In that August of 1989 the last formal political structures of the Polish United Workers Party and the People Republic of Poland were slowly grinding toward final and inevitable disintegration.

On the evening of July 31st 1989, we attended Mass celebrated by Polish Primate Cardinal Józef Glemp at Warsaw's St. John's Cathedral. Enormous crowds had arrived early. Young priests were trailing out cable to speakers in the road outside in anticipation of huge overflow crowds. My Aunt is 'old Warsaw' and brooks no denial of access to Warsaw events. She elbowed her way through the crowd and into the cathedral. My cousin Wojtek said, "don't worry – just follow". We did. Once inside she perched momentarily on the end of a central pew and then, by simply moving along the pew, forced a series of unwitting victims off the other end of the lengthy pew until she had secured sufficient room for all of us to sit.

The atmosphere was electric. As far as I can remember Cardinal Glemp called for calm and mutual respect in settling the nation's problems but was insistent that the demands for freedom and self-determination must be met. This being the eve of the 45th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, he dryly noted that German visitors were always welcome in Warsaw but that he wished that they might perhaps just stay away on August 1st. After Mass we left the cathedral and were swept along as part of a huge crowd surging slowly up towards the Royal Castle Square and then swelling down the 'Royal Mile' in the direction of what is now Piłsudski Square and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Wojtek was quietly excited. "Come on! Keep moving!"

For Fran and I from the West the moment was an astonishing revelation. Police, uniformed and armed, stood by nervously unable to react. The congregation peacefully and respectfully leaving Mass turned seamlessly and almost invisibly into a huge mass political demonstration. Banners bearing the familiar Solidarność logo appeared from under coats and were quickly assembled and raised aloft. The process was fast and seamless. At no point, even had they wished, could the police have precisely identified the moment of transformation from congregation to demonstration.

At the huge open square in front of the colonnade sheltering the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier the crowd dutifully formed itself so as to

leave a great empty space in front of the monument. Two young soldiers stood on guard, rifles shouldered, in front of the remnants of the pre-war arches, which form the monument. Upon the hour the relief guard of two soldiers with their officer marched straight across the square towards the tomb. The two soldiers already on duty were relieved and replaced. The crowd treated them with respect, but it was as if two completely different events were taking place in the same place at the same time.

Already Solidarność banners and standards were being paraded and microphones and speakers were suddenly connected and activated. The crowd was dignified, but warmly applauded speaker after speaker. The sudden presence of the standards of U.S. Polish veterans raised a special cheer. Warmest of all was the greeting reserved for an A.K. (Home Army) standard from Lviv, the 'nest of eagles', lost to Poland and annexed into the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. After speeches and with the singing of patriotic hymns the crowd dissolved quietly and peacefully. There was still, however, a feeling of anticipation hanging in the air.

We were up early on the morning of 1st August 1989 and wandered into the Old Town. Little processions of Scouts and Guides in the distinctive Polish uniforms with their standards and carrying buckets, cleansing materials and flowers marched past singing patriotic songs. They were cleaning the memorials to all those who had died during the Warsaw Uprising. There are some 300 plaques alone marking the places where Poles were gunned down in smaller or larger numbers on the streets of the wartime capital. There are also the larger monuments.

On August 1st brackets on Polish buildings and trams carry Polish flags. Flowers and candles mark the places at which people died and wreaths and flowers adorn the monuments. Often the simplest tributes are the most moving. Single red carnations are placed in bullet holes in the walls where executions take place. At 5.00pm an eerie silence falls over the city as a siren wails to commemorate the anniversary of the exact moment when the uprising started in that long ago August of 1944.

The uprising is remembered for the huge casualties suffered by insurgents and civilians and for the incredible heroism of the barely armed insurgents. It is also remembered for the barbaric destruction of the city by the Germans, who were already living in the shadow of their own inevitable forthcoming doom. The Germans brought in whole teams of academic 'experts' to actually ensure that historically and architecturally important buildings were destroyed first in case

time ran out, leaving them unable to complete the orgy of destruction!

The uprising is also remembered because of the intentions and the realities it revealed to the world. It demonstrated the passionate desire of the Poles to liberate their own capital city. It also revealed the real intentions of Stalin and the Soviets towards the Polish people. Having encouraged the Poles to rise against the Germans, Stalin halted his troops on the east bank of the Vistula in order to wait, denying assistance, until Polish resistance had first been broken by the Germans.

On the east bank of the Vistula at the main Praga junction stands a massive decaying stone block in memory of Warsaw's Soviet 'liberators'. At each corner of the monument stands the bronze statue of a soldier head bowed over his rifle or sub-machine gun. The monument is known to Poles as 'the four sleepers' and so, ironically and unintentionally, has come to commemorate the Soviet betrayal of the uprising in direct defiance of the wishes of its original creators.

On the early evening of the 1st August 1989 Wiska, Wojtek, Fran and I went to the Powazkowski cemetery. It seemed as if the whole of Warsaw was there. The last rays of the afternoon sun shot down in golden shafts between the tall densely parked trees, which are still the hallmark of every Polish cemetery, illuminating a patchwork of graves. All that could be heard was the crackle of leaves and twigs cracking under hundreds of thousands of footfalls. My aunt carried a heavy bag of candles. She stopped here and there to place and light a candle. First on the graves of people she knew, then on the graves of the fallen of particular units from the uprising then upon graves of the soldiers of the September 1939 defence of Warsaw, then upon graves of the soldiers of the Miracle on the Vistula in 1920, then upon the graves of insurgents of 1863, then upon the graves of the November insurrectionists of 1830, and then simply upon graves which did not yet have a candle.

The air was warm with the heat of the hundreds of thousands of candles. The air was heavy with their scent. At the junctions of some of the footpaths Solidarność banners had been planted and speakers were quietly addressing little huddles and groupings of people.

I stopped by the peculiarly arched tombstone of Walery Sławek. He who worked with Piłsudski before World War I, who served in the Legions, who was sometime Prime Minister of Poland and who shot himself through the head in the Spring of 1939 fearing that, after his death, he had failed his Marshal. The same Sławek who, with Piłsudski, signed the certificate accompanying the Legion Cross awarded to my grandfather in 1925.

One great slab of stone remained isolated and remote in total darkness. I asked Wojtek whose tomb it was. He stopped and stared and was suddenly animated. “There are no candles. The bastards are finished!” We were, he explained, standing before the tomb of Boleslaw Bierut - the Moscow puppet who had run Poland under Stalin’s orders after World War II. The party had always ensured that his tomb, like all the others, was awash with candlelight on this night. This time however they had other things to think about. Now they had abandoned him to an inglorious darkness.

We returned to the family flat. The first item on Polish television news showed the demolition that same afternoon of Bierut’s statue in Lublin where the puppet post-war regime had first been set up in 1944. I remembered the darkness surrounding his tomb. We drank and talked long into the night.

Some days later we were strolling with Wojtek in the Old Town Square. It was early afternoon. We did not notice anything. We did not possess that Polish sixth sense, a necessity in those days, for spotting who was who, what was what and for spotting the slightest change of mood or behaviour in the world around you. Wojtek of course knew straight away. “Something has happened. Wait here. I’ll find out!” He headed off and approached a group of young guys who were chatting and laughing. He talked with them briefly and returned with a huge grin. “It’s over. They are finished. They are so desperate that they are trying to turn a ‘policeman’ into our prime minister. That is the end of them!” The prospective nominee was General Kiszczak, minister of the interior and previously head of military counter-intelligence.

Most nationalities seem to adopt a particular group of foreigners as the butt for their jokes. The French make jokes about the Belgians. The English laugh (though less so these days) at the Irish. The Americans have their Polish jokes. Usually, such jokes are tasteless and often hurtful. Generally, the choice of target is not accidental but has some definite historical origin. The English jokes about the Irish focus on supposed stupidity, heavy drinking and propensity for fighting. When the English imported large numbers of Irish workers to build the canals in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries those workers were by definition likely to come from poorly educated backgrounds. They were kept in camps near to the work sites and were often provided with large quantities of alcohol as their only permitted relaxation. The cruel stereotype of the jokes becomes inevitable. The highly educated and refined Irish upper and middle classes were not going to be found building English canals!

To return however to the story in hand, the Poles had police jokes.

These focused almost entirely upon the supposed stupidity of the police.

Question: "Why does every police patrol have to have a police dog with them?
Answer: "Someone has to do the thinking".

Question: "Why do Polish police cars have a stripe along the side?"
Answer: "To help Polish policemen in their struggle to find the keyhole."

A Polish policeman walks into a bar only to overhear someone telling a police joke. Intervening in the conversation he says "Well I have to tell you that I am a policeman and I don't find that joke very funny". The guy telling the joke looks at him pityingly and says, "Don't worry. I'll repeat it again - very, very slowly".

I apologise to Poland's finest but you get the picture!

For the communists to now nominate a 'senior police boss' for prime minister was not only a desperate last move it was also seen by many as the ultimate 'police joke'. By that evening he was to be seen on Polish television hugging his wife, tending flowers in the garden, patting dogs, and, yes, kissing babies. It was all over. The nomination was not pursued.

We returned to the U.K. hugely elated.

In the weeks that followed Tadeusz Mazowiecki formed Poland's first post Second World War non-communist government. The Polish People's Republic had ceased to exist. The Third Republic had been born.

We had discovered the beauty of Warsaw's Old Town and the capital's museums, churches and palaces. We had fallen in love with historic Kraków and its ancient Wawel cathedral and royal castle. We had visited for the first time, albeit briefly, Zakopane nestling beneath the Tatra peaks. We had knelt before the Holy image of the Black Madonna at Czestochowa. We had seen much more besides. Above all we had become entranced by Polish hospitality, kindness and generosity of spirit. Towards the end of our trip, we drove out with Wojtek and Gosia to a small lake some kilometres to the north of Warsaw. There was a small bar just a little distance from the lake. They told us that, alas, there was, of course, no beer. We walked sadly away. However, the ever-resourceful Gosia popped back into the building. She caught us up carrying a large paper bag full of bottles of good Polish beer. They had sold it to her on condition that we drank it well out of sight of the bar, so that nobody else would discover that beer was in fact available for a favoured few. We sat on the bank of the lake

with our feet dangling into the shallow waters. Across the lake in the distance, we could see a single stationary rowing boat with its lone angler. Beyond him right across the sparking waters of the lake and sinking above the trees beyond we watched the vivid reds and oranges of the slowly setting sun. We drank good Polish beer and reflected on the mysteries and joys of this strange, beautiful, frustrating and amazing country.

We would be back, and Fran would be back much sooner than she expected.

In the late October of 1989 we were invited to send a representative from the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign to attend the miners' patronal 'Barborka' festival in Upper Silesia which was to be held since it was suppressed by the communists in 1947. I could not get time off work but Fran managed to find the necessary six days and so flew out to Poland. As they crossed the Polish coast the British Airways pilot happily announced that they were over 'Danzig'. The British take slowly to change. 'Danzig' had by then been Gdańsk for best part of a post war half century!

Fran was met in Warsaw by Wojtek who installed her on the express train that runs down to Katowice as 'The Miner' and returns to Warsaw as 'The Chemist', making sure to ask another occupant of the carriage to ensure that she alighted at the correct station.

In Katowice local Solidarność representatives met her and they then stopped first at the flat of a colleague who had delayed a celebratory 'Name Day' meal until her arrival. Afterwards they took the snow packed road to Jastęzbie Zdroj where Fran was to stay at the Presbytery. The town and its mines was one of the great Solidarność strongholds. Indeed, the Government accord of August 1980 was signed simultaneously at three places - the Gdańsk Shipyard, the Ursus Tractor Works in Warsaw, and the priest's office at Jastęzbie Zdroj.

In the latter days of the communist regime the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign had provided financial support to sustain underground Solidarność activity in Upper Silesia. For fairly obvious reasons it was much safer for them if we did not know the identities of the people we were helping. Tadek Jarski and Solidarity with Solidarity made all arrangements. On the mini-bus Fran discovered that the driver was the man whose family had been the main recipients of our support, which had freed him to work underground for Solidarność. It was a deeply moving moment for everyone concerned.

On the Sunday there was a spectacularly colourful Mass in Katowice at the cathedral with banners, flags, miners' bands, and the miners

themselves in ceremonial costume complete with plumed head-dress. Prime Minister Mazowiecki attended the Mass and then went on a 'walk about' in the streets of the city. After that the whole party attended a wreath laying ceremony at the Wujec Mine, in honour of the eight miners shot dead by the authorities in the immediate aftermath of the initial declaration of Martial Law. Events then moved to the local Miners' Hall complete with its decorated shrine to their traditional patron - St. Barbara.

Polish T.V. cameras were present as an interpreter explained to Fran "In a few moments our Prime Minister will address the Polish nation live on Polish television. Then when he has finished you will speak". There had been no prior warning, no time to think or prepare. And so, Fran spoke live on Polish national television for several minutes. She described the warmth of British support for Solidarność throughout the 1980s. She described the work of Solidarity with Solidarity and of the Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign. Some years later we were, amazingly, presented with a video recording of her speech. We still have it. It is still deeply moving.

In Warsaw Fran had noticed children playing in the snow. In Jastębzie Zdroj there were, she noticed, no children playing in the snow. This simple observation would have considerable significance for us shortly thereafter.

Already, she noticed, Poland was changing. There were now food, alcohol and goods in the shops in considerable quantities.

While Fran was in Poland, I received a letter saying that we had both been awarded the Gold Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland by the then Polish Government-in-Exile. It made a happy end to a momentous year.

We did not think about the future. Poland was free and for a moment we could bask in the warmth of their reflected glory.

We still had our careers. Mine was a shambles, but Fran's was beginning to take off. We were both local councillors fighting tooth and claw on local issues. These are very major parts of our lives even if they are only the backdrop to this particular story. If we saw a 'Polish future' for ourselves it was as stalwart supporters of Polish community activities in Kidderminster and as summer holiday visitors to Poland. One never knows the future even though it is always only just around the very next corner.

4. WHY DIDN'T YOU MENTION THE FLAGPOLE?

My first personal contact with the new post-communist Consul General in London, Dr. Janusz Kochanowski, cannot in fact be described as particularly happy. At some point in the early 1990s Tadek Jarski phoned me from Warsaw. In this changing world he was now President of a new Institute for Privatisation in Warsaw and was directly responsible to new Privatisation Minister Lewandowski.

The Minister wanted to visit London. There were two problems. Firstly, it was not the Poles' turn to visit and diplomatic conventions are quite rigid on such matters. Secondly the Minister wanted to combine a whole series of objectives - meetings with British Ministers and M.P.s, business contacts, the media and the Polish community - into one very tightly packed package, which although perfectly legitimate slightly stretched convention. The costs for the visit were to be met by a prominent merchant bank. To facilitate the package Tadek needed a friendly organisation to formally host the visit and to make the necessary arrangements at the British end. Tadek had determined that the still existing Wyre Forest Polish Solidarity Campaign would be acceptable if somewhat minimal 'hosts' and that I could do the necessary 'organising'. On my usual principle of 'anything for an interesting life' I happily obliged. Tadek's information was excellent and setting up a complex two-day itinerary of meetings with Ministers, M.P.s, journalists, Poles, business groups and bankers, complete with accommodation, meals and receptions, proved a piece of cake. It was almost too easy to be true. My life did not normally work like this.

My only hiccup had been with the Consul General. In my ignorance (in those days I did not know an Ambassador from a Consul General) I had contacted the Embassy happily asking them to provide the necessary, suitably large and comfortable, cars with drivers in order to move the Minister around throughout complex and exhausting programme, which we had carefully and speedily prepared. The Consul General duly phoned me. He could not guarantee cars, and he politely and firmly left me in no doubt whatsoever that the organisation of such a visit was properly a task for duly trained, qualified, experienced and properly authorised Polish officials. He was far to kind to say what he thought of me, but I think I got the message.

He was of course completely right but I had grown so used to ignoring the wishes of Polish officialdom under the previous communist regime that it did not actually occur to me to behave any differently now. I simply sailed ahead and subsequently sent the Consul General a detailed programme for the visit, which I thought

demonstrated that I was up to the job. I failed to apologise. The Consul General kept his thoughts to himself but very generously organised the cars and drivers and tried to keep the visit on the rails.

Lewandowski duly arrived - met U.K. Ministers and conducted various business meetings. His visit was however cut from two days to one, as he had to return to Warsaw for an urgent vote in the Polish parliament! His office never got round to thanking us for our efforts and I was not impressed by their attitude throughout. On the other hand, it was a pleasure as always to work with Tadek. This was also noticeable as the first and so far, the only occasion when I have emerged with a modest profit from my endeavours for Poland. That, I am absolutely sure, will never happen again in this life.

Down the line one or two people hinted that I might like to consider becoming an Honorary Consul of the Republic of Poland. It seemed a strange and unlikely idea. I gave it little thought and did not take the idea in the least bit seriously. I do not know how it came to be pursued further.

By now my father's health was failing badly. After his retirement he simply ceased to do anything. He went from frenetic jet setting to total inertia. He did not fully dress for days at a time. In retrospect we should have spotted that there was something deeply worrying about these developments. At the time I viewed all of this as simply a further manifestation of his peculiar and unpredictable character. Now I think that he was already well into a complex cocktail of afflictions, which would lead to a rapid but nevertheless protracted decline before his death in 1996.

When he received an invitation for lunch with the Consul General, he was highly elated. By then he was severely ill. He took the invitation as a huge compliment and was anxious to accept. My mother was rightly fearful about his ability to make the trip from Surrey into central London. He was, however, absolutely determined and with the assistance of a helpful taxi driver he duly succeeded. I had realised that the invitation was intended for me and not for him, but there was absolutely nothing that I could say or do without severely hurting his feelings. I could hardly raise the matter with the Consul General.

In the event everything went as well as could be hoped. The Consul General welcomed my father with enormous charm and hospitality and seeing that he would not be able to make it to the restaurant for lunch, duly had the restaurant bring the meal to the Consulate General. They dined and talked and my father was delighted. A few days later the Consul General's secretary phoned and charmingly glossing over the error invited me to lunch with the Consul General. I have to admit that

when I first did meet Dr. Janusz Kochanowski in his office at the Consulate General I was completely terrified and despite his enormous charm I was quite right to be terrified.

I am not an academic or a thinker. I have never had one seriously truly original idea in my life (at least not when sober). I am an organiser - an 'apparatchik'. My role is always to work out what is the worst possible outcome from any situation and to make sure that, preferably, it never happens or, at worst, to minimise the ensuing damage. Apart from that I am a campaign manager and a business organiser. I specialise in nuts and bolts.

Janusz Kochanowski is exactly what I am not - a precise and rigorous intellectual and academic with a razor-sharp mind. He took me out for lunch in a quiet downstairs niche of a very nice little Italian Restaurant a short distance from the Consulate General. Without, I am sure, meaning any unkindness he dissected me as carefully as he dissected the dish in front of him.

I was grilled on my family history, my education, my career, my activities in the Polish community, my knowledge and views on Polish and international affairs, British political issues, Polish history, poetry, literature, cinema, theatre and music. Nothing escaped his attention.

At the end of the meal, I was utterly exhausted and shaken at the rigour of the interrogation and left convinced that nothing would come of it.

I have subsequently come to enormously admire and respect Janusz Kochanowski. He is a man of enormous intellect and perception who imposes very high standards upon himself and those around him. He is a man of vision - a true internationalist and, at one and the same time, a dedicated Polish patriot. He is kind, generous and warm hearted.

Although they are totally different and indeed in many ways complete opposites Janusz Kochanowski and Tadeusz Jarzembowski have had more influence upon me than anyone else. I love them both dearly.

The actual process of becoming an Honorary Consul was to say the least peculiar. Poland had not had Honorary Consuls in the United Kingdom during the communist period but the process of establishing them in the early 1990s should have been relatively simple as both countries were signatories of the1960s Vienna Convention, which is the basis in international law for the appointment of both professional Consuls and Honorary Consuls to foreign states. Reality was more complex. The Poles did not want to make official nominations to the British until they were first assured informally that they would be

approved. The British would not comment on nominations until they were official. This nice little diplomatic dance would last for several years. Again, I thought that nothing would come of it.

Meanwhile far from my Polish activities ending with the restoration of democracy in Poland, they had indeed simply changed and redoubled.

Firstly, there was Father Bernard's Children's Fund.

The project arose as the direct result of Fran's visit to Poland in November 1989. Fran had noticed that while children played in the snow in Warsaw there were then no children playing in the snow in Katowice and its surrounding towns. Upper Silesia, the region centred upon Katowice, is a huge industrial conurbation on the scale of the English West Midlands. Fran discovered that it was the most polluted place on earth. Poisonous fumes and heavy metals from Polish heavy industry and also from heavy industry across the Czech and German borders, had poisoned landscape and people. In those days, if you took the trouble to ask, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office would tell you that spending just twenty-four hours in Katowice would permanently damage your health. Fran is living proof of the accuracy of that assessment. She still has the cough to prove it. Most seriously of all, children were being poisoned in their mothers' wombs. The incidence of physical handicap and brain damage at birth was the highest in the world. After decades of communist neglect facilities for these children were almost non-existent.

Fran proposed that we set up a small Kidderminster based registered charity to specifically help those youngsters in Upper Silesia. We did so. It is called Father Bernard's Children's Fund. I became General Secretary. Zygmunt Zych became Chairman - a post now held by Edmund Szymczak.

Initially it was a total disaster.

This was not due to corruption or ill will. It was very much simpler than that. We did not understand how things operated in Poland and the Poles there could not understand our strange demands and strange methods of working. There was enormous good will on all sides but it was simply not enough.

We were a British registered charity bound by the rules and requirements of the British Charity Commission and by strict rules of accountancy. We needed clear procedures and clear targets. The Poles were locked into a different situation working within different frameworks and expectations. Relatively small, but to us substantial, sums of money went to Poland. They were all used to assist Polish

children in real need. Of that I have no doubt. However, the large project upon which we had unrealistically set our sights neither prospered nor progressed.

I think also at that time the Poles, in all the elation of the changed political situation, were flooded with offers of charitable help from all directions. Many did not deliver. Many indeed were the delusions of people who, whatever their intentions, simply could not deliver. By the time they ran into us they were probably well advised to treat all benevolent westerners with considerable caution. I was horror struck. For the first time in my involvement in Polish affairs I had got it horribly wrong. I had made mistakes. I had made a fool of myself. I did not like it!

Down the line we were suddenly 'lobbied' by the Archbishop of Katowice and by Bishop (now Archbishop) Szczepan Wesoły, who is responsible for émigré Poles worldwide, and by the British Embassy in Warsaw. The cause which they wanted us to adopt was the Centre for the Rehabilitation and Education of Brain Damaged Children in Katowice, which is run by Dr. Aleksandra Kałużna. It turned out that Dr. Kałużna and a colleague desperately needed to get to the U.K. to see at first hand the work of the various institutions and organisations working with severely handicapped youngsters. They needed to assess which methods would best work in their situation in Poland. The problem was that, while Dr. Kałużna could get the basic funding to run and maintain her Centre, there was no funding for travel and training.

In the event the British Embassy in Warsaw funded their travel costs from Poland to the U.K. and back again. We funded travel, accommodation and living expenses in the U.K. and organised the programme for them.

Dr. Kałużna had indicated to us that she just needed "a bed to sleep on and a few apples to eat". I hope that we did much better than that. Dr. Kałużna is one of the world's great crusaders. Her own son is profoundly handicapped and extremely intelligent. His birth had turned this little Polish doctor into a crusader whose total faith in her mission to help the most handicapped of children moves mountains on a regular basis.

At our first meeting I found her obsession with her task not a little intimidating. She was l00% focused on her mission. As we got to know her, she gradually started to smile and relax. It was difficult. The trip was clearly of such importance for her. As she relaxed and talked about what she was doing we gradually fell in love with her and her warmth, her compassion, her humanity, her energy and determination. She is a real miracle worker.

During her visit they stayed with the Bibic (British Institute for Brain Injured Children) centre in Devon and with the Bobath Centre in London. They spent a third week with Scope (previously known as the Spastics Society) in Redditch and visited schools for handicapped youngsters in the Kidderminster area. She also talked to us all at the Polish Club.

Later we were to host training in the U.K. with Bobath in London, meeting training and accommodation costs, for one of her staff. We have also enjoyed her hospitality and visited her incredible centre (see Appendix II) in Poland.

Today we are still working on ways of developing the relationship with her committee. In December 2000 I received a certificate naming me as an Honorary Member of the Committee for her Centre. It was a great honour!

A major aspect of fundraising for Father Bernard's Children's Fund has been the sale of hand painted wooden eggs. Although it is now in decline Warsaw long boasted one of the world's largest markets, housed in an enormous stadium built to mark the tenth anniversary of communist rule in Poland on the east bank of the Vistula, just over the Prince Józef Poniatowski bridge. This market, on the ruins of a sporting stadium, is, or least has been, a multi-million pound business employing many thousands of people. The actual bowl of the stadium is unused. The surrounding land and the outer slopes leading up to the outer rim of the bowl are a densely packed mini city of covered stalls.

At one point Vietnamese and Koreans selling white electrical goods, sound systems, televisions, videos and clothes occupied these slopes. Today there are many Poles, Russians and Ukrainians as well and mobile phones and their accessories have been added to the available bargains. The upper rim, around the top edge of the abandoned stadium, was the haunt of arms salesmen and all sort of strange wheeler-dealers. It was possible to purchase a MIG fighter (we know someone who did it) or buy a MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) scalpel by scalpel or in total. Today much of the business is cheap spirits, music CDs and CD-ROMS of highly dubious origin. It is amazing to come across at least a hundred different album covers for a band which you know for certain has only cut two CDs in its career. There is much else lurking there from fishing gear to low quality busts of Lenin.

However, we bought eggs - hand painted wooden eggs. We would wander around and identify who was selling craft goods and eggs. Wojtek would then approach them and haggle in Polish to establish a price - we knew perfectly well that if 'rich westerners' approached them then the price was bound to rocket. A thousand or so eggs would

then be counted into plastic or burlap bags, which we had taken along for the purpose. Honour on both sides dictated that the eggs must be counted into the bags one by one and this could take considerable time. Money then exchanged hands. In the early days we were paying £30 for 1,000 eggs or 3p each!

We would then move on to a second seller and repeat the process. Generally, by the end of the second transaction a previously unknown character would sidle up to Wojtek. News of our transactions had spread. Westerners, maybe English, accompanied by a Pole who was doing the talking, were buying up vast numbers of painted wooden eggs. What was going on?

The stranger was the organiser of the wider 'interest' bringing in the folk-art goods and lots else besides from across the Ukrainian border. It would be intimated to us that he, or she, had the sole rights to negotiate further purchases with us. Appropriate quantities of whatever we wanted would be here within the hour. Payment would be in cash. The unit price had marginally increased in line with rising demand.

On the first occasion we bought ten thousand of the hand painted wooden eggs for £300. The ten thousand eggs were packed into our Peugeot 405 STDT Estate and duly transferred to the U.K. for sale. We had only recently acquired the car and to get a cheap deal Fran had bought a nearly new 'demonstrator' model. As a result she had unintentionally, but as it turned out fortunately, acquired a car with air conditioning.

In order to be on the safe side, we had asked Wojtek to check with Polish customs. When they had learnt that all the proceeds were to go to help Polish children they were marvellously accommodating. They usefully decided that this was not in fact a single consignment of 10,000 eggs, which might have attracted their interest. Rather, they decided, we were exporting one egg and then a second egg and then a third egg and so on. In all they decided that this was 10,000 separate export transactions, each of them too miniscule in value to attract attention.

We rolled up to the border confident that we would have no problems. Indeed, there was no problem but we were puzzled by the apparent desire of both Polish and German border officials to stand well clear of the car. Nobody appeared to want to come close to the car, let alone investigate its contents. Professional pride we were to discover had yielded to self-survival.

We had shot across from Warsaw to the West German border without stopping or leaving the car - a remarkable feat both of driving

and bladder control. Even at the border we had not left the car. Once across the West German border I got out of the car to stretch my legs and to find the toilets. I returned to the car and now, with fresh air in my lungs, I could smell what neither of us had hitherto noticed - the vile and overpowering stench of cheap varnish emanating from our car.

After painting each egg is coated in varnish for final protection. Hold an egg to your nose and you will notice nothing. Have them lying around the house on display and you and your visitors will notice nothing. Pack 10,000 into a car and travel across central Europe in the heat of summer and you are a passenger in a travelling bomb. We had not noticed because the odour and fumes had slowly developed as we had travelled. We were completely unaware. What would have happened if we had not had air conditioning, or if either of us had smoked I hate to think. We staggered back across Western Europe with air conditioning at full blast, driving in the cooler hours and always parking carefully in the shade.

Back in the U.K. we sell the eggs for £1.00 each in churches and in schools in the weeks before Easter. Our first 10,000 eggs, which had cost us £300 in Poland raised £10,000, being a profit of £9,700 or, to put it another way, a profit margin of 3,233% on each and every egg.

Even before eggs there had been earrings. To be precise, gaudy cheap dangly metallic earrings popular in the early 1990s with teenage girls – particularly young teenage girls. In the U.K. these retailed at between £1.00 and £1.50 per pair. We purchased them at 10 pairs for 1p and sold them at 75p per pair. I think that is a 74,900% profit margin!

We had spotted them in the little market off Targowa, which had been the predecessor to the Stadium market. There you could buy wedding dresses, leather jackets, jeans, fish and sausage, as well as earrings. When she realised we were ‘westerners’ the lady on the stall was horrified - “but these are for Ukrainians” she told us “not for you”. We were expected to purchase expensive goods like good westerners. We were certainly not supposed to buy up trashy trinkets in bulk. When Wojtek explained how we would sell them in England to raise money for Polish children she tipped in several hundred extra pairs free of charge. They would all go on sale on our carnival stall alongside our tombola. At that time, we saw an incredibly battered bus parked on wasteland by the market. A man was standing on a box talking loudly and waving Polish bank notes. The crowd from the bus were listening intently. He was explaining how to use the money to best advantage. They came from some remote village deep in the Soviet Union where money had largely dropped out of use in favour of barter.

They had realised their assets, pooled their resources and arrived here to purchase basic items of clothing and perhaps a few luxury items - maybe even some dangly metallic Polish earrings.

When we first met Stephanie Openshaw, she was in her early twenties - beautiful, mercurial and fascinating although often carelessly frustrating. Enormously talented she had trained as a pianist at the Birmingham Conservatoire. Towards the end of 1989 she insisted that I attend a concert at the Adrian Boult Hall at the Conservatoire. It seemed to me to be rather a strange programme. There was an unbearable modern choral piece followed by what seemed like a never-ending Gamelan (Indonesian gongs) performance. In my opinion the Gamelan can be considered a serious instrument - but only of torture. Then it came to Stephanie who played a piano concerto by a sadly neglected Czech composer. The composer had himself flown over for what was the first performance of this work outside his own homeland. I couldn't help but wonder what he had made of the wretched Gamelan interlude. It was utterly typical of Stephanie that she should have insisted on playing an unknown piece. She was on brilliant form and even with my poor ear for music I knew that her performance was in a truly different league. I was entranced by her performance.

Sometime subsequently the idea crept into my head that we would ask Stephanie to record a cassette tape of piano music for sale in aid of Father Bernard's Children's Fund. Although CDs were already taking over this was still at a point just before low volume private production was a practical reality. David Gaukroger, the Head of Music at Kidderminster College, also ran a small recording enterprise. He agreed to produce and Stephanie agreed to play. Choosing the content proved to be a nightmare but eventually Stephanie settled upon a series of pieces by Chopin plus some Beethoven and Mozart and two short pieces by her then boyfriend, and later for a time husband, David Lane. She went away to practise on her beloved Steinway.

David Gaukroger eventually got permission for us to record on the Steinway in the lounge adjacent to the Head Teacher's office at Malvern Girls School. The instrument was in good shape and was re-tuned for the occasion. The piano had an interesting history. Earlier in the century Elgar and George Bernard Shaw had played a duet on it.

The recording had to be completed in the two days of an Autumn Half Term. Four of us (Stephanie both Davids and myself) duly set off for Malvern by train. On the journey down Stephanie was somewhat ill at ease.

The lounge in which she was to record was large, airy and graciously elegant and comfortable with unexpectedly good acoustics.

The piano was in perfect condition. An adjacent office gave David Gaukroger all the space he needed to set up his control desk. It was a beautifully warm day and at first we had the French windows open and David Lane and I strolled on the lawns while Stephanie fidgeted over the piano. When she was ready to start David Lane stood by her to turn over the pages of the music - an assistance that was a failsafe to give her confidence rather than an actual necessity. I, now completely useless and redundant, sank back in a huge armchair to watch and listen. At first proceeding were interrupted by a bird outside clearly wanting to sing along with the music. Fortunately, he departed following the timely arrival of a large cat, which helpfully remained to deter any return of the bird. Only now, as Stephanie really got going, did I realise just what I had done. Unthinkingly I had put Stephanie under the most enormous stress and pressure.

She had clearly rehearsed at enormous length. Now her intellect, skill, training and artistry were totally focused. It was amazing to watch the sheer passion and vitality of her playing. Her ferocity and anger with herself when she decided she had not yet met the standards which she had set for herself was amazing. She was a total perfectionist. Nothing was good enough. Time and time again she would halt in mid piece - “No, no, no, it’s not good enough”. Then she would light a cigarette and draw on it for a minute or two and then all of a sudden it would be “O.K. let’s do it, let’s go!” When she got what she wanted the relief and triumph were truly tangible. She would grin, mutter, “that’s it” and rush out into the garden for another cigarette. It was the same for each track. Amazingly at the end of the first day she was exactly halfway through the recording schedule. The second day was exactly the same. I think that we had to meet a 5.00pm deadline. She finished at exactly 4.55pm! She was totally exhausted - too tired even to be exultant. She slept in the train on the way back. I sat watching the changing landscape - guilty at what I had put her through.

It has to be remembered that what we were in fact doing was making a live recording without an audience. We did not have the capacity to subsequently edit and mix the masters. Stephanie had aimed to capture each piece in turn in a single perfect take. That was exactly what she had achieved.

I had known as she recorded it that the outstanding track was Chopin’s ‘Raindrop Prelude’ and so it proved. I have played it many times and compared it with recordings by the great pianists. Few of their versions match up to hers, and what is remarkable is that they had the full facilities of a professional recording studio, with all the opportunities to enhance the sound, or even replace individual notes,

while she cut it in a single take. The tape was released under the title 'For the Children of Poland' and sold extremely well. With no commercial outlet or marketing, we simply peddled it ourselves. A few copies were sent as gifts to Poland with unexpected results. A couple of years later I stood and watched at a Warsaw street stall as the customer in front of me bought what, infuriatingly, turned out to be their last copy of a CD entitled 'For Poland's Children… …by the great English pianist Stephanie Openshaw'. I subsequently discovered that it had sold extremely well. At that time probably 95% of CDs and tapes sold in Poland were illegal copies of one sort or another. I would dearly love to get hold of a copy.

Shortly after making the recording, she performed the same repertoire for us at a Piano Recital at Kidderminster Town Hall. It was a marvellous performance. Somehow the complexities of her character and the nature of the times prevented her from making the impact on the musical world which she should have done. Sadly, she was to die of cancer in her thirties.

In 1992 I was invited to join the Presidium of the Federation of Poles in Great Britain and served under two excellent Chairmen - Zygmunt Szkopiak and Jan Mokrzycki. The Federation has existed as an umbrella organisation for Polish community organisations in the U.K. since shortly after the Second World War. However it is in the post-communist period that it has come into its own. It is now the organisation recognised by both British and Polish authorities as representing the Polish community in the U.K.

Like any 'umbrella' organisation the Federation has to walk a delicate tightrope balancing the differing but equally legitimate interests of its component parts while articulating a voice of its own. To succeed the Federation must work closely with the S.P.K. (Polish Ex-Combatants Association) and the Polish Catholic Mission to England and Wales and the many other organisations which make up the Polish world in the U.K.

From the Second World War through to its formal dissolution upon handing 'power' over to the newly elected President, Lech Wałęsa, the political leadership of the Polish community in the U.K. had rested with the Government-in-Exile. With the passing of the Government-in-Exile its representational and lobbying roles fell to the Federation, greatly widening its scope and influence.

Zygmunt Szkopiak brought me in to make use of my knowledge of British political structures. The aim was twofold, to assist with political lobbying of the British authorities on matters of interest to Poland and to the Polish community in U.K., and to assist with casework for Polish

citizens locked in problems with the British authorities.

As I was the first non-Polish speaking member there were bound to be problems. Both Zygmunt and Jan handled the matter tactfully. There would always be someone who would whisper a translation in my ear and items where I was a major player were taken in English.

In terms of casework, I do have to say that I was absolutely horrified by the uncaring, petty, vindictive and also frankly incompetent and utterly unproductive activities of the British Home Office under Michael Howard. Most mainstream politicians of all parties have their good points, however much one may disagree with them politically. I have never had any reason, however, to give Michael Howard the benefit of any such generosity or doubt. In my book he simply does not deserve it.

Two cases stand out very clearly in my memory.

Robert and Beata had arrived in North Wales towards the end of the communist period in order to visit, I think for the first time, her aging uncle - a war veteran who had lost a leg in action in North Africa. While they were here, he was taken seriously ill and, as there was no one else and he did not want the intrusion of British social services, they remained here to nurse him. By the time he died the communist authorities had seized their flat in Poland leaving them well and truly stranded. They sought formal asylum in the U.K. By the time the case reached us they had a young son born in Wales. Robert and Beata turned out to be the most marvellous couple you could wish to meet. They were straightforward, completely honest and did everything by the book. They did not lie or deceive. They simply told the British authorities the truth. They refused to become a burden on the English social benefits system preferring to earn money and to support themselves by hard work.

M.P.s of all parties in North Wales were supporting their cause. Their local County and District Councils had carried outspoken declarations of support. Local District Councillors were threatening to physically blockade their home to prevent a forcible deportation. Local newspapers and radio stations carried extensive features backing their case. The local branch of the Royal British Legion had organised an enormous petition urging the authorities to let them stay. Their excellent solicitors were going well and truly beyond the normal call of duty in pushing the case. All of this massive public interest and support had arisen simply because everybody could see that they were an honest and straightforward, decent, hard working young couple with a small son, trying to make their way in the world. In addition, the population of North Wales thought it absolutely intolerable that a boy

born in Wales, and by now learning Welsh, could be expelled from the land of his birth. Absolutely astoundingly a local Building Society gave them a mortgage on a small run-down property despite knowing perfectly well that they could be deported at any moment!

The Home Office meanwhile had treated them with a shameful and chaotic mixture of incompetence, contempt and downright cruelty. There were constant delays, twists, turns and double crosses. Gratuitous cruelty included invading their home on the morning of Christmas Day in order to make yet another threat of instant deportation! Throughout the course of several painful and stressful years the message from Howard and his wretched minions was that eventually, come what may, they would throw them out.

Remembering Richard's earlier efforts, I took to writing letters - to anybody and everybody who might be able to help. We made phone calls and we issued press releases. We lobbied.

Strangely and suddenly when we had all but given up help Howard caved in and without explanation or apology gave them 'exceptional leave to remain' in the U.K. permanently. That is of course what should have happened in the first place. This family posed no threat or precedent.

So why did Howard cave in? It may all be coincidence but I am not so sure. Just before the change of heart we had written seeking support from Prince Charles in his capacity as Prince of Wales. We expected the usual 'it's a political matter - the Prince cannot get involved' response from a Royal Secretary. That was indeed the reply which we received but in addition the response went on unexpectedly to the effect that however, the Prince wishes me to inform you that he is extremely concerned about this case'.

We subsequently discovered that the Prince, with his usual thoughtfulness and kindness, was about to hold a reception at his Highgrove home for representatives of the Polish Ex-Combatants Association from across the country. Of course it is only conjecture but could it have been that the Prince was less than amused to discover that while he was about to pay tribute to the contribution and sacrifice of Polish war veterans, the Home Office had set about making life as wretched and miserable as possible for two young Poles, living in his Principality of Wales, whose only crime was to do their duty by one such veteran?

Anyway, we got what we wanted. Fran and I went up to a super evening at the Royal British Legion Club in Llandudno when they laid on a party to celebrate the outcome.

This case stands out but I can honestly say that the Home Office under Howard was from my point of view a nightmare of uncaring incompetence and oddly malicious intent.

In many cases one of the greatest difficulties was to get the victims to initially accept just how long it could take to get the issue settled and just how petty and outlandish the process could be. They inevitably came to understand what we meant through harsh and frustrating experience.

Particularly crazy was the case of Alan and Joanne. I stumbled across their case by listening to BBC Radio WM's Ed Doolan Show.

Joanne was Polish and after her first marriage in Poland had failed, she went out to Australia to visit her sister. There she met and fell in love with Alan, a true Australian original and pilot who ran his own airfreight company. Eventually Joanne overran her permitted stay in Australia. It became certain that if she did not leave voluntarily, she would be forcibly deported to Poland. Alan held dual Australian and British citizenship having actually been born in the U.K. He decided to drop everything and bring her to England to stay with his relatives here while he tried to resolve matters.

Immediately upon their arrival at Heathrow British immigration tried to put Joanne on a plane to Warsaw but Alan kicked up hell and eventually won a ten-day remission with permission to take her to stay with his West Midland based relatives, On the advice of the relatives he then phoned Ed Doolan's phone-in show seeking advice. Hearing the show, we offered to help.

Joanne was still married and the first priority was to organise a divorce. Amazingly we found Polish speaking solicitors who were functioning both in London and her hometown in Poland. They set about that task. Essentially Joanne needed to get a divorce and then marry Alan in order to get back into Australia. We had no hesitation in assisting as they were clearly hopelessly and desperately in love with each other.

The whole thing was like some bizarre and intricate set of dance steps. The Australians would not let her back into Australia until she was duly married to Alan. She could not marry Alan until she had divorced her first husband in Poland. That had to happen in Poland in Polish time. Meanwhile the British kept changing deadlines for her to leave the U.K. - each change involving heated rows and exchanges. Unfortunately, however, the British deadlines had nothing to do the Polish timetable. The Poles were happily producing the required paperwork but not to a timetable that could satisfy the British

timetable which in any case did not meet the Australian timetable!

This would have gone on indefinitely if it had not been for Alan's ferocious determination. He was an Australian by nationality and an Australian by temperament. Nobody on earth was going to be allowed to stand in the way of his love for Joanne. Local M.P. Sir Patrick Cormack effectively and repeatedly intervened with the British authorities; Ed Doolan's off the record advice on how to handle the Australian authorities (yes, he's another Australian himself) and his morale boosting coverage were vital; while the ability of the Polish Consul General in London, Janusz Kochanowski, to get things moving at the Polish end was indispensable. Eventually the Polish divorce was secured and Fran and I attended the wedding of Alan and Joanne at Walsall Registry Office. They flew off to pick up their lives again in Australia.

What struck me very forcibly was the mind-boggling stupidity of the whole business. We had not been dealing with mass murderers, war criminals or the mafia. We had been dealing with two very nice decent human beings who had simply fallen in love. As a result of one small problem, they had fallen foul of rampant bureaucracy, which had crashed down onto their heads costing them time and money and causing them untold stress, uncertainty and misery.

Just after Alan and Joanne flew back to Australia, Fran and I sat down to good bottle of wine (or two) and idly started to speculate on how much the whole farce had cost the governments concerned. There had been huge amount of correspondence and paperwork, umpteen phone calls, a heavy smattering of faxes, lots of meetings, several formal hearings and numerous investigations and processes. The time of civil servants is precious and expensive. The whole misguided undertaking had probably cost in excess of £150,000, most of which will have been paid by the British taxpayer. I hope that Alan and Joanne are happy. I hope that someday they will tell this whole fairy tale to a hoard of slightly disbelieving grandchildren.

There were many other campaigns and causes in which I was marginally involved.

As Consul General, Janusz Kochanowski registered an enormous success in securing the removal of visa requirements for short-term visitors between Poland and the U.K. Today you can, as a citizen of one, visit the other as a tourist for up to 180 days at a stretch without need for a visa. A wide range of Polish community organisations supported the campaign. The victory was however essentially down to Janusz. At the time Janusz wrote exultantly:-

On 26th May 1992, in the course of an official visit to Poland Mr John Major announced the abolition of visa restrictions for Polish nationals visiting the United Kingdom.

Britain has now joined the majority of European countries which had long ago removed for citizens of the Republic of Poland the annoying bureaucratic obstacle to free travel in the form of visas.

This is a dignified and optimistic outcome of the campaign for the removal of visas which we carried out together for a long time.

As it often happens, however, to work together for this result was even more important than to achieve it.

Now that the goal has been reached, I come to the conclusion that more significant than the lifting of visas was the generous manifestation of kind feelings toward my country which I so often experienced on this occasion. It also demonstrated to me that both the very prominent and common members of the British public are willing to advocate with equal ardour and selflessness a cause which they believe is right.

May I use this opportunity to convey to you my heartfelt thanks and express sincere gratitude for your invaluable support for this cause. I am confident that our common achievement will serve well the interest of Poland and the United Kingdom.

Janusz Kochanowski and the Federation of Poles in Great Britain also worked tirelessly to maintain the Polish character of the home for the elderly at Ilford Park in Devon.

In terms of lobbying, we worked hard to both discover the views of and influence the opinions of British M.P.s and M.E.P.s with regards to Poland and Polish membership of N.A.T.O. and E.U. The last two elections to the European Parliament in U.K. were of particular significance. The former was the most informative because at that time M.E.P.s were being elected to represent individual constituencies each comprising roughly eight Westminster constituencies. As a result, we could contact individual candidates directly via their local offices. The results were extremely positive. Candidates of all parties were, on the whole, more pro-European and more favourable to extension of the E.U. than were their parties. It was obvious that there was a huge amount of good will towards Poland combined with an almost total ignorance of Poland and actual Polish conditions and aspirations.

By the subsequent Euro-election, slates of Party candidates were fighting huge multi-member Euro constituencies in a crude form of proportional representation as distinct from the previous ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system. Now any questionnaires to regional

headquarters were siphoned off to be dealt with by party headquarters. As a result, every response from a Labour candidate was exactly the same as the response from every other Labour candidate with one odd honourable exception. It was exactly the same with the other parties.

We did discover that the best way to now contact candidates directly was by e-mail. With some difficulty we compiled lists of candidate's e-mail addresses. We discovered that 8.00pm, when most candidates were far too busy to be checking their e-mail, was the perfect time to send e-mails to them. A few of course responded straight away but the vast majority of candidates of all parties would regularly check their e-mail after 11.00pm or in the early hours after midnight. Replies sent to us between the hours of 11.00pm and 3.00am possessed a charming directness.

I may of course be wrong but I suspect that internet users at those hours may, to put it gently, be somewhat relaxed. Indeed, they may be about to pour one too many and knock it over their keyboards. At any rate these late-night responses were, shall we say, honest, vivid and straight from the heart if occasionally incoherent.

We uncovered an interesting political paradox. The Labour party at the last Euro-Election was apparently broadly pro-European. Despite this their candidates were generally the most evasive and hostile in response to our queries. Meanwhile the Conservative party appeared to be avowedly anti-European and yet their candidates were privately overwhelmingly positive on the issue of E.U. expansion and particularly pro-Polish. Liberal Democrats, supposedly the most pro-E.U. of all, appeared to be happy to talk about anything on the planet, or beyond, but not about Europe.

At first, we had sent newsletters to M.E.P.s explaining the Polish case. Subsequently we formed 'Poland Comes Home' as a separate lobbying body, acting alongside the Federation. Ryszard Kaczorowski, last President of the Polish Government-in-exile, and Lech Wałęsa, first President of post-communist Poland, kindly agreed to become Presidents. Jan Mokrzycki is Chairman and I act as Campaign Director.

Poland Comes Home has produced lobbying material, hosted visits by Polish ministers and lobbied British ministers. We have written letters and issued press releases. In particular we write to M.P.s and M.E.P.s on every issue relating to Poland. However, we have failed to achieve the impact which we really need due to our inability to attract substantial funding from Poland. That has certainly dulled our impact.

Eventually there came the day when I was actually installed in 1997 as an Honorary Consul of the Republic of Poland. Poland already had

an Honorary Consul in Gibraltar but on this occasion three of us were installed - Jo Carby-Hall from Hull, Graham White from Sheffield and myself. In due course George Peszyński from Bristol would join us. We are very different personalities but we get on remarkably well.

Ambassador Stemplowski was charming as usual as he conducted the three brief installation ceremonies at the Polish Embassy in London. We were welcomed. We signed a form saying we would never seek financial recompense or make any financial claim in respect of our duties - in our case Honorary means very precisely and exactly 'unpaid'.

Incidentally, I for one do not have a problem with being unpaid. Yes, I know it is divisive because only people who can afford to subsidise the role can afford to take it on. On the other hand, I strongly believe that being unpaid gives us a rare degree of independence to act and to speak our minds. Whatever we say or do, and whether our suggestions are acceptable or not, we can never be suspected or accused of monetary motives. I value that independence.

We also received the papers appointing us as well as packs of materials, which, strangely, varied slightly in each case. I received two Polish flags (each 3' by 5') - one without the crowned eagle and one with the crowned eagle. No one could tell me precisely when you fly the one instead of the other. I received a small desk flag. One of my colleagues received a car flag. We received also various booklets. Then there were the rubber stamps - in English and in Polish. Rubber stamps and visiting cards assume an importance in Polish society that the British find impossible to comprehend. In Poland every business, organisation and institution has its own rubber stamps. So often are they used that my own consular stamps have already worn out and been replaced. Business cards are exchanged on every possible occasion and no self-respecting professional Pole would feel complete without an obligatory bulky wallet of transparent pockets in which to file the ones he or she collects in the course of business.

Over dinner we asked the Ambassador and the new Consul General (Janusz had completed his term of office some time before) why none of us had received warning until virtually the last moment that we would need a flagpole.

"Well", we were told, "not having made such appointments before we consulted all the other Embassies informally as opportunity arose. On the whole they gave us totally conflicting advice about the process of appointing Honorary Consuls. They did however all agree on one thing. They all said don't tell them about the flagpole until it is too late for them to pull out".

Every Consulate must have a brass plate and a flagpole. In my case my Consulate is my home. There is no suitable point at which to place an angled flagpole projecting from an upper wall and so I have a twenty-foot-high vertical flagpole in the front garden. I can tell you with complete certainty that it takes exactly one ton of concrete underground in order to support a twenty-foot-high flagpole above ground. Our neighbours are generous in their tolerance. Of course, there are advantages. When they sell their homes, they will be able to say that they live in the 'consular district' of Kidderminster.

The problem of which flag to fly, and when, was the least of my problems. In the run up to the appointment I was forever asking on every possible occasion "Yes, but what exactly does an Honorary Consul do?" Whoever I asked at the Embassy or the Consulate General the reply was always the same, "Michael, it is not a problem - please, do whatever you like". This response was usually accompanied by a gentle smile indicating that the question was not really worth considering and a slight vaguely dismissive gesture of the hand indicating that the discussion on that matter was now at an end so could we move onto something more worthy of discussion.

At the time I considered this unwavering response to be to say the very least unhelpful. Now I understand better. The precise internationally agreed status of both professional and honorary consuls is defined by the Vienna Convention which actually takes quite a bit of space to say really quite little. The Vienna Convention reminds me of the rules of football. It tells you what you can and cannot do in theory but it doesn't tell you how to kick the ball or win the game.

Despite the fact that the Vienna Convention sets the rules, the way the game is played varies enormously from country to country. Some countries simply do not appoint honorary consuls. Other countries make the appointment as if they are awarding a medal. The appointment is simply an honour with little or no work or responsibility to follow. One honorary consul I met was basically forgotten by the appointing state for seven years. Another appears to have no responsibility but to spend one month every year on the Head of State's luxury yacht. Other honorary consuls may be citizens of the host country with little or no previous contact with the appointing country but whose company, maybe Solicitors, do business with the appointing country. Other honorary consuls undertake varying degrees of workload ranging from minimal to enormous. Some are concerned mainly with trade or commerce, or maritime interests, while others are concerned mainly with tourism or individual casework.

I suspect that the precise role of Polish honorary consuls also varies

considerably from place to place depending upon circumstances. I can only speak with any sort of certainty about the position in the United Kingdom.

Of course, in reality there are notes of guidance and there is a solid framework of advice and guidance from the Consulate General in London. In Polish there is even a book 'Konsul Honorowy' by Pawel Czubik and Michał Kowalski.

I now understand what the Ambassador and the then Consul General were saying when they refused to say anything other than "whatever you like". The fact that we are given no resources or power actually gives us considerable freedom of action as long as we act responsibly. I apologise to any constitutional lawyer who, upon reading this, is now in the early stages of a total nervous breakdown but I am talking about the reality of the office rather than about the theoretical and legal framework.

I suspect for a start that the Polish honorary consuls in the U.K. were appointed in a rather unusual manner. Normally governments site honorary consuls where they have substantial business interests or at places which are visited by large numbers of their nationals. Indeed, the first Polish honorary consular appointment in the U.K. in Gibraltar I take to be essentially a case of a local business representing Polish interests in a crucially sited port.

The rest of us are rather different. Effectively we were 'head hunted' by Janusz who was anxious to acquire certain skills and who was far less interested in our incidental geographical locations. Jo is a distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Hull and a visiting Professor to more than one Polish University. He has a strong interest in the convergence of Polish law with EU law in preparation for Poland joining E.U. Graham is a senior lecturer in dentistry at the University of Hull who has done much to transform the training of dentists in Poland and to secure the donation of considerable supplies of medical equipment to Polish hospitals. George has enormous expertise and experience related to civil engineering and property management and is a key figure in the Polish community in the South-West of England involved in a wide range of training and charitable activities. I am the political hack. So we end up with honorary consulates in Gibraltar, Bristol, Sheffield, Hull and Kidderminster.

We are all very different from each other and we perform our roles in very different ways depending upon our particular individual interests, expertise and sources. Despite our differing approaches and backgrounds, we all get on extremely well together and are bound by mutual affections for Poland, for each other, for the job and for Janusz

Kochanowski who gave us this remarkable opportunity.

And so what of today?

Well, for a start I no longer live in a house. I live in a Consulate. Each of us had to make our own arrangements to establish a designated Consulate. George has an office in Bristol generously sponsored by Allied-Irish Bank. Graham's Consular premises are kindly provided by the University of Sheffield. Jo and I use our own homes.

Our modest early 1970s home is distinguished from its neighbours by the flagpole and the brass plaque but those are not the only differences. I can now understand how priests and vicars feel who live in rectories or presbyteries adjacent to their churches. Our house is no longer just the home of Mike and Fran Oborski and four assorted cats, who would probably not put that list of occupants in quite the same order of priority. It is also the 'Polish Consulate' or indeed 'our Consulate' to which many other people - visiting Poles or members of the local Polish community - now expect to have almost the right of access. Our living room and dining room must also function as public and reception rooms with as much Polish material as possible. No Pole in Poland would ever decorate a home in such a way. It would be totally ridiculous and completely unwarranted. However, we are in England and not Poland. English friends and visitors find the 'Polishness' either eccentric or fascinating. Polish visitors are suddenly warmed by memories and images of home. It suits us. We are comfortable here.

Our living room is dominated by a huge woven wall hanging from Łódź depicting Poland's crowned white eagle on a red shield. The opposite wall is dominated by a large oil painting of Warsaw's Łazienki Palace - the palace on the lake, among our favourite palaces in Poland. There are watercolours of the Old City in Warsaw and paintings on glass of the Madonna and child from Zakopane. The bookcases are full of books about Poland and the CD and DVD collections contain much Polish material. There are small copies of the 'heads' from the ceiling of the Wawel in Kraków over the door and the display cases are full of Polish glass and memorabilia and in particular Fran's collection of dolls. Fran has several hundred of these dolls in Polish national costume each about six and a half inches tall. Some are single figures, others are couples, but best of all are the groups of figures displaying not only regional costumes but also regional traditions. Krakowiak lovers flirt over a fence. Górale shepherds herd their sheep. A girl chides a flock of geese while others carry buckets and churns. A Krakowiak band plays, while his flag swirling accompanists surround a Kraków Lajkonik. The hall is crammed with old photographs of

Warsaw and the staircase is a veritable shrine of framed cartoons and postcards of Józef Piłsudski. Upstairs there is a long workmanlike office built over our garage with a bank of computers, telephones, printers and fax machines, which are essential to our political and consular work. The guest room has become a library of books on Poland - guide books, travel, history, military history, cookery, folklore, literature, poetry, dictionaries and language.

I was appointed as an Honorary Consul on lst April 1996 but did not become aware of the fact until the end of the year when I was actually told by friends who had picked up the news in Warsaw. We were by then, I discovered, being listed in Polish Foreign Office lists and even on teletext on T.V. Polonia. Sadly, my father had died in February of 1996 following a protracted illness. He had however known that the appointment was definite from the fact that I had been awarded the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland in the preceding year.

Our formal installation took place at the Embassy in London in the spring of 1997. We then held a reception to open the Consulate prior to which Father Jacek at the Church of Our Lady of Ostra Brama in Kidderminster blessed the flag. Local Polish friends who attended were obviously moved to see the flag flying over a Polish Consulate here in Kidderminster. It was somehow a tangible expression of all the changes that had happened for Poland and Poles everywhere.

Due to the fact that the required passport style photograph had been misplaced I did not receive my Legitymacja (identification card) as Consul and so had to collect it from the Foreign Office in Warsaw during our next trip to Warsaw and so it was actually signed by then Foreign Minister Darius Rosati on 22nd August 1997. Even then they failed to stamp it with the necessary embossing stamp and so that had to be rectified at the Embassy in London in the Autumn. In due course the Consul General visited us for an 'official opening' ceremony with yet another reception.

So, after all of that, what do I actually do?

Much of the work is simple and routine and many things have simply to be referred to London to the Consulate General, but even in those cases we can often offer an added layer of service. If, for example, a Polish citizen visiting the region loses their passport I not only put them in touch with London to sort out the issue but I can chat to them, calm them down, reassure them and talk them through the process.

I never fail to admire the professional Polish consular staff in

London. They are dedicated, principled and extremely hard working. Poland should be proud of them. They are also, and I will stick my head out, undervalued, underpaid and under-resourced. They deserve better. And no, I am not attacking the Polish Foreign Ministry in Warsaw. They too function at a very high level with limited resources and they are a real credit to Poland and, incidentally, are generally very highly respected by western governments. Sadly, Poland was destroyed between 1939 and 1945 and then stagnated for another forty years under communism. The new Poland despite progress which only a dozen years ago would have seemed unimaginable, still faces massive economic and structural difficulties. In these circumstances it is inevitable that resources are not what they should be and that professional Polish embassy and consular representation overseas remains over-stretched. So as an Honorary Consul I am delighted to help wherever I can.

A reoccurring theme, which constantly baffles people, is the whole business of “dual nationality” and “how do I get a Polish passport?” Here I am talking specifically about ‘youngsters’ born in the U.K. with British citizenship anyway and who have either one or two Polish parents.

The central misunderstanding is that most people equate ‘passport’ with ‘nationality’ as if the two terms are interchangeable. In fact, the difference is obvious the moment you start to think about it. In British law I am a British citizen born and bred in Britain. I am a British citizen whether or not I have a British passport. My British passport is essentially just a travel document, which demonstrates to the authorities of foreign powers that I am a British citizen under the protection (in so far as it runs) of Her Majesty’s Government.

Many of the people who come to me are convinced that by ‘claiming’ their Polish passport they will be ‘claiming’ dual nationality and are perplexed by what is meant by dual nationality and what that new status will mean for them.

In reality dual nationality is not something you claim. It is the package you come with, if you are so placed, whether you like it or not and it is the condition in which you remain unless you renounce one or other of those nationalities. The criteria for determining nationality vary from country to country. I am a British citizen under British law because I was born in Britain. I am a Polish citizen under Polish law because one of my parents was Polish. These statements remain true whether I apply for no passport, one passport, or both passports.

In reality someone who in fact has Polish nationality but has never asserted that nationality and has never claimed a Polish passport will

face absolutely no problems in travelling to Poland on a legitimate British passport. I have done it myself many times without any difficulty whatsoever before I obtained my Polish passport.

Having been born abroad with one Polish parent, to obtain my Polish passport I had to establish to the satisfaction of the Polish authorities that I was indeed entitled to Polish citizenship. In order to do this, you need to contact your nearest Polish Consulate General. If you happen to be in the West Midlands of the United Kingdom, I will be happy to steer you along a path that I have already taken but the actual process will be conducted by the Consulate General in London. You will be asked to complete a short biographical form and provide a short C.V. as well as a brief statement that you have not previously renounced Polish citizenship. All of these must be in Polish. You will also need to provide two copies of a passport type photo with head turned to show appropriate ear and eye (no, a full-face British style passport photo will not do). You will then need to provide documentation that establishes your Polish citizenship. If your father was born in Poland this might normally mean copies of your birth certificate, your parents' wedding certificate and your father's birth certificate. A notary competent in both the English and Polish languages must translate any of these not in Polish into Polish. Such services are available in London. This will probably cost about £50 per document. There is also likely to be a charge from the Consulate General of around £130.

The Polish authorities are perfectly aware that many Poles lost everything, including all their documents, in the war and so they will actually accept a very wide range of papers and documents as proof of Polish citizenship. So if your Polish parent does not have, or did not leave, all the normal family papers don't worry. There may well be something else there which will do the trick. Is a Polish passport an advantage? If you are doing business or purchasing land or property in Poland then certainly yes. For many of us it is simply a matter of pride. I am proud to be British and proud to be Polish. I am proud to hold both passports.

By the way if you hold both British and Polish passports, and are resident the United Kingdom, and you are visiting Poland then you should enter and leave Poland on your Polish passport.

l am constantly asked to validate signatures and legitimise documents with my signature and rubber stamps. My authority to do so is dubious but so far, no Polish court or civil authority has ever queried anything. The truth is that for elderly Poles anxious to settle an inheritance, will or land transaction the trip to London can be

expensive, exhausting, or impossible. If I can help, I do. It is a two-way trade as Polish courts occasionally ask me to deliver documents some of which may be unwelcome to the recipient. It is not really my job to do so but I deliver them.

The movement of human ashes and remains to Poland is strictly a matter for the Consulate General. I can however offer sympathy and advice to try and steer the bereaved through the process. Sadly, I know the procedure only too well having taken my own father's ashes to Poland for final internment.

Many of the queries I receive by phone, post and particularly e-mail relate to Polish parentage and ancestry. Often it is possible to point people in the right direction. Sometimes sadly it is impossible to help. A common impossibility takes the form of "My mother has just told me that her husband is not my father. Apparently, my real father was a Pole called Ted whom she met briefly in Scotland during the war. There cannot have been many Poles in Scotland and there must have been fewer still called Ted. Can you help me to find him?" I have to explain firstly that there were many thousands of Poles passing through Scotland at that period. Secondly, I have to explain that Ted' is not exactly a common Polish name. He may have been an Edward, an Edmund or a Tadeusz or he may have been adopting an assumed name! From the number of such requests I receive I am increasingly impressed by the imagination and activity of some of the Poles of that generation.

Occasionally the requests for assistance in tracing ancestors and family can be heart-breaking. One young man was desperately anxious to trace what he clearly believed would be his heroic Polish roots. His great grandfather's surname sounded perfectly Polish. He had, I was told, fought in the Silesian Uprisings after World War I, which decided which areas fell to Poland and to Germany. Later he had fought at Riga in Latvia. Alas the unit mentioned was a German Friekorps unit which fought against the Poles in Silesia and butchered men, women and children in Latvia before being eliminated in turn by the Latvians. The old man's name may have sounded Polish but he was in fact violently anti-Polish. I saw no point in telling the young man that the heroic Polish great grandfather of his dreams was in fact a vicious right wing German fanatic who met a deserved and violent end. After an appropriate interlude I simply reported that I had been unable to discover anything for him.

Fortunately, most requests for information on roots and ancestry are easier to satisfy but no two cases are ever the same.

The British police are extremely helpful and friendly. I suspect that

they are not quite sure about the standing of Honorary Consuls but then neither am I. In fact there are just two Honorary Consulates in Worcestershire and, as the senior in length of appointment, I can technically claim to be 'Head of the Diplomatic Corps' in the County. Interestingly enough with only two countries in the world having Honorary Consulates in the County it is rather remarkable that it is Poland's neighbour - Lithuania.

Sometimes the police contact us seeking assistance for a Pole who has lost their passport or wallet. With regards to the latter, we are not a 'soft touch' as there are occasionally quite outrageous 'try-ons'. We refer them all to the Consulate General.

At other times the police are seeking interpreters for interviews or court appearances. Usually, we can find someone to help. I clearly remember one senior police officer seeking a very last-minute replacement interpreter. Their previous regular interpreter (fortunately nothing to do with us) had dutifully sat through many cases. On the fateful day however, she had struggled with a singularly complex cross-examination of a highly evasive young Pole facing serious criminal charges. Totally frustrated she eventually burst out "I can't stand anymore of this. He's clearly a two-faced lying bastard. The idiot is obviously guilty!" I never heard the full outcome but I gather that she narrowly escaped serious repercussions. Maybe the court agreed with her.

Over the Christmas and New Year of 1999 - 2000 (the supposed millennium as distinct from the real one of 2000 - 2001) I vaguely remember hearing a brief local radio story about a passing shortage of frozen vegetables in the shops. In the light of subsequent developments, I will now always take such stories just a little more seriously. A few days into the New Year the English neighbours of a deceased Pole, who were anxious to know when and where his funeral was to take place as they wished to attend, contacted me. It transpired that not having seen him for a few days they had contacted the police to express their concern. Eventually, after several phone calls, the police had arrived in the early evening of New Year's Eve and forced an entry to the property. They found the old man dead in his bed. He had died peacefully and unexpectedly in his sleep. The neighbours had contacted me because they knew that the old man had no relatives in this country.

When I contacted the police, they informed me that the body was with the coroner. When I contacted the coroner, he had no record of the case but suggested that I contact the undertakers who were always employed in such cases. They in turn had no record of the case. At

first, I assumed that there might be a simple error. Possibly a Polish surname had been incorrectly recorded. Over the next couple of days, the police seemed to become ever more evasive. A full answer was always just around the corner. Eventually I threatened perhaps rather unrealistically to raise the case with the Polish authorities at a very senior level. The impact was dramatic. Within five minutes I received a call from a very senior officer who was clearly squirming with embarrassment. The truth. he said, was that they had - temporarily he hastened to add - lost the body. There had, it emerged, been an unusually high number of deaths that winter. The mortuaries in the region were full. As a result, some refrigerated frozen food lorries had been hastily borrowed (hence the brief shortages in the shops) for the interim storage of corpses until more usual facilities could be found. While some of these vehicles were parked behind police stations others had been parked behind supermarkets. In the confusion the authorities had temporarily lost track of exactly what, or more accurately who, was parked where!

Within a few days the matter was resolved and the gentleman went to his final resting place after only a slightly interrupted journey. I have always preferred fresh vegetables to frozen. That taste seems ever more pronounced these days.

Incidentally the British police had also bungled the matter of identifying a clear address for his relatives in Poland. All that ever emerged from their New Year's Eve search of the property was an 'address', which was garbled to the point of incomprehensibility. Amazingly the staff at the Consulate General managed to trace the family in Poland despite the paucity of reliable information with which we had been supplied.

One night while watching the early evening regional television news, Fran spotted an item about eighteen young people from Central Europe, over here earning money fruit picking, who had been injured when their bus had been in collision with a lorry. It was a reasonable guess that some of them would be Polish. We phoned the police and ascertained the number held in hospitals, the region and their nationalities. Some indeed were Poles. The Consulate General in London was by now closed for the night so I duly faxed the information over night so that it could be dealt with first thing in the morning. The next day I was phoned by the Consulate General at 8.45am. I was asked to elicit information and thank the police, ambulance and fire services concerned. I was also asked to arrange regular visits to the Poles in hospital from members of the nearest Polish communities. This I did. I was amazed to be phoned again at 1.00pm to be told that staff from the Consulate General had visited all three hospitals involved - in

Cheltenham, Worcester, and Birmingham - had seen all the injured, had spoken to families in Poland, were arranging to get the least injured back to Poland, and, where other central European consulates in London lacked the resources to do so, were assisting their nationals as well. Fortunately, there was only one case of serious injury – a Lithuanian girl with a shattered pelvis who had been rushed to Birmingham.

I was enormously impressed by the efficiency and compassion of the professional Consulate General staff. Any Pole travelling abroad, certainly in the U.K., should be delighted and reassured to know that such marvellous support and assistance is available in the case of real emergency.

As Honorary Consuls we do our best to support and encourage Anglo-Polish trade. This is not always easy. When Lech Wałęsa visited the U.K. as Polish President he took the opportunity to hammer home the message that the Poles would be delighted to see British companies doing business in Poland and investing in Poland and that he was disappointed and surprised that the British were not there in greater force. Speaking to a predominantly Polish audience at the Polish Embassy in London he was even blunter. “Where are the British?” he demanded.

My personal view is that this still remains a largely unanswered question. The Germans, French, Italians and Americans are in Poland in force but the British economic presence is surprisingly limited. There is for example no major U.K. bank seriously committed to a major presence in Poland. Anglo-Irish Bank are there in force but no U.K. bank.

My own theory is that the British economy was hitting a slight downturn at the precise moment when the Polish market began to open up and that caution at that time prevailed. By the time the British economy was in a somewhat more buoyant condition the Russian market was opening up and a number of British companies leapfrogged over Poland straight into what was perceived to be the larger, and therefore potentially more rewarding, Russia market. In reality they would have been better advised to opt for the far better structured and more reliable Polish market. In some cases, the initial bad experiences in the old Soviet Union have prejudiced British attitudes towards the whole of the old Soviet Bloc and not just to the old Soviet Union.

Some British companies have also found it easier for a variety of reasons to assert themselves in the much smaller frameworks of the Hungarian and Czech economies rather than in the larger and sometimes more demanding Polish market.

Given my Polish sympathies I have considerable personal difficulties in dealing with companies who see Poland simply in terms of a 'low labour cost environment'. I of course want to see a better deal for Poland. One has however to be realistic and accept that one of Poland's current attractions is of course relatively low labour costs.

I have now spoken at a wide range of conferences and briefing sessions organised by British organisations and institutions and aimed at stimulating in various ways Anglo-Polish trade and cooperation. Many such initiatives are extremely well organised and deliver real results. Others are almost bizarrely amateur in approach. I remember one briefing session for representatives of British companies who were about to visit Warsaw for a four-day trip heavily subsidised by Her Majesty's Government as long as they met four key criteria.

Firstly, they could not undertake more than one such trip per year and secondly only two could be to the same country in any ten-year period. Thirdly they had to attend a briefing at the British Embassy in Warsaw on the first morning of the trip and fourthly they had to attend a buffet at the Embassy on the second night of the trip. During the pre-trip briefing it became clear to me that none of the party had any prior business contacts or engagements in Warsaw. They were apparently going to simply establish such contacts, with no prior preparation whatsoever, while they were out there. One participant was a British farmer whose business was now failing. He told me that he had spent two nights in southern Poland many years before. On the strength of this he now wanted to launch a business in Poland. He had not the slightest idea what sort of business wanted to launch or what sort of person he wanted to meet in Poland. He hoped to run into somebody 'useful'. He had no idea whatsoever of the economic, political or social climate in Poland! Admittedly this case is the extreme end of the spectrum but it is an end of the spectrum that should simply not exist!

In some circumstances I suspect a certain British arrogance or at least a certain assumption that poor benighted foreigners are bound to love us Brits as, although superior, we are benign. This can lead to lost opportunities. Had Marks and Spencer arrived in Warsaw in 1990 there would have been five-mile queues round the bock in order to welcome the arrival of heaven on earth. In the early 1960s all Polish ladies shopping in London bought handkerchiefs at Harrods, snipped off the labels and carefully re-sewed them into their newly purchased Marks and Spencer coats and dresses before repacking them into their Harrods' bags ready for transit back home to Poland. By the time Marks and Spencer eventually and belatedly arrived in Warsaw they were just another player in a large and sophisticated market which had easy access to Italian and French products and design.

Polish Trade Counsellors in London have made enormous inroads in stimulating Anglo-Polish trade and commerce. I still believe, however, that the British have constantly underrated the size, scale and potential of the Polish market.

The number of Anglo-Polish exchange visits between schools, colleges, women's groups, sporting clubs and cultural, particularly musical, groups is growing all the time by leaps and bounds. This ranges in scope from highly formalised 'twinning' arrangements to almost ad hoc arrangements, which spring up as the result of chance contacts. In addition, there are many exchanges at occupational and professional levels involving such groups as the police, fire service, social workers, youth workers and many, many others. Community organisations such as Rotary and various Christian churches and denominational groups are also heavily involved in such exchanges. Many of these receive official sponsorship and recognition but many go almost unrecorded except by the happy participants. No one seems to have any idea exactly how many of these exchanges are taking place. From my point of view the demand for briefings, information and contacts is enormous.

Particularly rewarding is the organisation and involvement with Polish cultural events across the region - particularly musical events whether folk dance and music or classical events. The Wyre Forest Anglo-Polish Society, of which I am Chairman, runs an intensive programme of monthly events. I work closely with Maria Lee who does an excellent job as Chairman of the S.P.K. (Polish Ex-Combatant's Association) in Kidderminster and of the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Club in Kidderminster, which is the home for many local Polish community activities and a 'second home' for many of us. Father Jacek Trochim, of the local church of Our Lady of Ostra Brama is never anything less than charming and helpful.

Many of the phone calls we receive start with the same nervously apologetic "I know that you are going to think that I am very stupid but I have just seen this little advert in the papers and it must be too good to be true…" By now I know exactly where the conversation is going. They have seen an advert from the Solihull based New Millennium company offering ten-day return coach trips to Zakopane with half board for about £120.00. I have never been on one of their trips but I know perfectly well from the many reports and recommendations which I receive that these are first rate value for money. Probably half of the enquiries I receive are from people looking for a good cheap interesting holiday anywhere. The other fifty percent of enquiries are from those who specifically want to visit Poland or central Europe in order to find out "what it is really like" but who are

unwilling to commit a large amount of money to what is for them such a speculative venture. It is this latter group who later make a second phone call which goes “You won’t remember me. I phoned you about going to Poland with New Millennium. Well, we had a great time. Now can you tell me how to start exploring Poland properly”.

The Polish National Tourist Board in London do a superb job but I have to say that I do find the overall policy from Warsaw somewhat puzzling. We seem to push Kraków and Zakopane at the British. Now don’t get me wrong. Kraków is a city of enormous history, style, and culture - truly one of the great and most hospitable cities of Europe. Zakopane in the Tatra Mountains on Poland’s southern border is magnificent for winter skiing, summer walking and all-the-year-round highlander culture, folklore and hospitality. To a lesser extent we seem to promote the Baltic coastal strip of Gdańsk and Sopot and the attractions of walking and adventure in the deep south-west. However, the magnificent Mazurian lakes seem to be the reserve of Polish and German visitors. Maybe they already attract sufficient tourism, but it is an enormous pity that the region is not marketed to the British. It is a region of vast numbers of lakes ranging in size from the modest to the enormous. Many are linked in chains which makes exploration by water all the more fascinating and enjoyable. Anyone who enjoys yachting or kayaking cannot fail to be entranced. It is a paradise for anglers. It is a region too of beautiful small lakeside towns, varied flora and fauna, and magnificent intermittent forests.

The Poles also largely fail to market family holidays in Poland to the British. There are many young Britons of Polish descent who want to go to Poland, spend a week or so with the relatives in Poland, and then find something else for another week or two which will also be attractive to their own small children. Poland in fact possesses such attractions in abundance. Fran and I have spent a superb time in an A frame chalet (with shower, hot water, toilet, kitchen, phone, television) sleeping eight at Pasym some twenty kilometres southeast of Olsztyn. There are facilities for caravans and camping, an onsite restaurant, bar, an indoor pool and games complex, stables and lakeside swimming and boat hire and much more besides. There are many such places and they represent great value for money.

Strangest of all however is the failure to promote Warsaw, the capital city, as a tourism centre in the west. While Prague and Budapest are well known to British tourists Warsaw remains a secret. Yet in many ways Warsaw is a perfect attraction for British tourists. Still cheap by western standards, Warsaw boasts a huge diversity of tourist and historical attractions, all capable of absorbing a great deal of time and interest but mostly located in a conveniently compact area

stretching from the underexploited New Town Square, through the essential Old Town Square, onto the Royal Castle Square and out along the Royal Mile, through Nowy Świat onto the magnificent Łazienki Park. Within that area the city boasts many museums, palaces and historic squares with numerous excellent restaurants and cafes and a wide range of hotels on the spot or within easy distance. The major shopping area on Marszałkowska is also close at hand and even more outlying attractions such the palace at Wilanów are in reality only a short journey away. This is also a city of magnificent parks and in Summer numerous outdoor bars. It is too, a great city for music, theatre and entertainment. Warsaw also boasts excellent cheap public transport with trams, buses and metro. Why Warsaw is not heavily promoted as a major tourism centre to the British is completely and utterly beyond me. I have yet to meet any Briton who has been there and who has not fallen for its charms.

Much of my consular work relates also to historical and cultural matters. We give numerous talks for schools, colleges and organisations. Sadly, there are still enormous misconceptions about Poland amongst the English who have not visited the country. At the last sixth form college I visited 85% of the students thought that Poland was currently a Communist People's Republic! As they were 17 or 18 years old and communist rule in Poland ended when they were 5 or 6 years old this level of misinformation reflects poorly on their education as world citizens. Most people who have not been there assume that Poland is bitterly cold all the year round and are amazed to learn of the summer heat and outdoor bars. They are convinced too, that in terms of distance from U.K., Warsaw must be some sort of suburb of Moscow. They are surprised to discover that Warsaw is in fact almost exactly halfway between London and Moscow. Indeed, several small towns and villages near to Warsaw dispute among themselves as to which is exactly the precise centre of continental Europe.

The most asked question ("did Polish cavalry really charge German tanks?") will be dealt with later!

Sadly, too much of my time is taken up responding to anti-Jewish slurs from Poles (or people pretending to be Poles) and anti-Polish slurs from Jews (or people pretending to be Jews). Sadly, there are many such incidents in print but it is particularly rife on the internet, from tiny minorities on both sides. There is real stupidity on both sides. Whatever the legal red tape, the protracted existence of a forest of crosses on land near Auschwitz, as a clearly anti-Jewish demonstration, did nothing to improve Poland's standing in the world. Similarly, the proposals to site a disco near to the camp, thankfully eventually

rejected, were at best thoughtless. Again, they only damaged Poland's reputation abroad.

On the other hand, a recent Jewish attack on the late Polish poetess Zofia Kossak for alleged anti-Semitism was equally shameful. Kossak had bitterly opposed Jewish political objectives in pre-war Poland but became a leading figure organising support for Jews in Poland during the war. She was herself imprisoned in Auschwitz for her pains. Her memory deserves better.

It amazes and saddens me that the two peoples who suffered most in World War II - Poles and Jews - cannot yet find full reconciliation. It angers me that sinister and evil bigots attempt to manipulate these difficult areas for their own twisted and despicable ends.

On a lighter note are the constant enquiries about Polish folklore, marriage customs, music, literature, history and culture. These come from people who can remember a childhood dish cooked by a beloved grandmother or from those anxious to entertain a Polish guest or prospective son-in-law or daughter-in-law in the appropriate manner. Requests for recipes are followed by the quest for ingredients and suppliers in the United Kingdom. We also receive regular requests for information about the nature, merits and availability of Polish vodkas and beers. On the latter in particular we offer high quality and truly informed advice. There are also those trying to trace the military careers or medals of relatives or locate the source for unclaimed medals. Sometimes questions are amazingly specific. A recent e-mail said "I will be in Poland for a week or so but only in Warsaw for one Sunday morning passing through. Can you tell me where, if anywhere, I can buy CDs in Warsaw on a Sunday morning?" There is always a solution - in this case Empik on Marszałkowska.

As an Honorary Consul I get invited to the Polish Embassy several times a year but particularly for receptions to mark Constitution Day (May 3rd) and Independence Day (November 11th). Sadly, if I am doing my job properly I usually have to force myself to forgo the pleasures of the Ambassador's deservedly renowned hospitality in order to attend Polish community events in the West Midlands marking the very same anniversaries. Poles are enormously proud of the Constitution of May 3rd, 1792. Just as it appeared that the state was dissolving quietly into oblivion Poland had produced, under the slogan 'the King with the people and the people with the King', the first great European statement of human rights, political enfranchisement and social reform. It was highly praised by Edmund Burke while Karl Marx lauded it as the sole example in history of nobles voluntarily empowering peasantry. Sadly, it was to be a final ray of light at sunset.

Alarmed, the Russians, German and Austrians hurried to proceed with the total dismemberment of Poland. Despite Poland's removal from the map of Europe, memory of the Constitution of May 3rd sustained Polish spirits through the dark decades to come. However far Poland had fallen, Poles knew that they were capable of the highest and finest communal aspirations.

November 11th is a strange day for émigré Polish communities in the United Kingdom. In the First World War partitioned Poland does not feature in its own right in the casualty lists. However, Poles were conscripted to fight in the armies of the three partitioning empires and so - with Pole often forced to fight Pole - suffered greater losses than any other nation. In addition, other Poles volunteered in France or served under the peculiarly Polish banner of Piłsudski. Poland itself became an enormous battlefield devastated by battles and by advancing and retreating armies. However, because the conflict ended in the miracle of national rebirth, November 11th is celebrated in Poland as Independence Day while for the British it is Remembrance Day.

In Poland, November 11th is marked with military parades and a national holiday. In Britain, émigré Poles generally mark the occasion with events on the nearest Sunday - a day shared with British Remembrance Services. They take their standards to the solemn British services of remembrance for the fallen of the two world wars. Afterwards they depart to their Polish Clubs to relax, talk and drink and to celebrate Independence Day with songs, poems, speeches and drama.

Clearly, November 11th is well and truly in the experience of the beholder.

Christmas is another busy time celebrated by Polish families and communities world-wide. New Year - Sylvester - is another great Polish celebration. Indeed, the Poles even clearly outclass the Scots in their enthusiasm for New Year's Eve celebrations.

In October 1998 I attended a conference for Polish Honorary Consuls across the E.U. organised in Warsaw by the Polish Foreign Ministry. It was an excellent conference in terms of organisation, hospitality but, above all, in terms of content focusing very tightly on the role for Honorary Consuls in promoting Poland in the run up to Polish membership of E.U.

Writing in the 25th October 1998 edition of 'Warsaw Voice' Wanda Jelonkiewicz wrote under the headline 'Flying the Flag':-

The role of these officials, many of whom have taken up their posts in

recent years, is emerging with ever greater clarity and significance.

Honorary consuls, practically non-existent in Poland after World War II, have been reinstated since communism's collapse in 1989. At present, Poland has 100 honorary consuls in 65 countries. For example, there are four of them in Great Britain, four in France, three in Spain and two in Belgium. Even in Katmandu, Nepal, there is a Polish honorary consul's office. During a conference in Warsaw on Oct. 5-6, attended by almost 30 honorary consuls from 18 countries, participants discussed how these supporters of Poland may help promote the country's integration with the European Union.

An honorary consul's work, as defined in the Vienna Convention, is complementary to the activities of professional diplomatic and consular representatives. They help Polish citizens in arranging matters abroad and serve Poland's long-term goals. The range of their activities is very wide, from providing assistance to victims of accidents to facilitating the establishment of economic contacts. Their presence is especially important in places where there are no professional consular missions.

"We try to organize educational and cultural programs," says Prof. Jo Carby Hall, honorary consul of the Republic of Poland in Hull, Great Britain. "We are working on the `Poland Comes Home' program, which will focus on Poland's admission into the EU." Another honorary consul in Britain, Mike Oborski from Kidderminster, is the chairman of a lobbying committee that supports Poland's bid to join the EU.

"Poland's admission into the EU cannot be achieved only by promoting the country among the elites of the European partners, as occurred in the case of the negotiations to join NATO" believes Deputy Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski. "In the face of the crisis in Russia we want to be perceived not as an emerging market, but as a converging market that will soon catch up with the mainstream of European civilization. Information about good economic results has to spread abroad in every possible way, " he says.

The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs believes that consuls may play an important role in this process by spreading knowledge of Poland in their communities. The meeting in Warsaw provided them with information, convincing arguments and materials. Polish authorities hope that the consuls will lobby the legal, university and business communities, promoting Poland as a country ready to enter the EU.

Sikorski has announced that the government will soon propose a new program for promoting Poland abroad. "There is not much time left. If the program is presented too late, it may be of little use."

So far, as an Honorary Consul, I have avoided any real disasters but there has been one major near miss of potentially magnificent

proportions. Indeed, it was such a good story that it featured on John Peel's B.B.C. Radio 4 'Home Truths' programme making something of a hero of the main participant who was, needless to say, not me. I was working at the computer in my office, which is a long narrow room with built in work surfaces running its whole length. The computer in question is at one end of that work surface. Suddenly our chief cat, a very large, handsome and supremely self-confident Abyssinian /tabby cross called Tadek, arrived and duly stomped over the keyboard with predictably catastrophic results, before tramping with dirty paws across newly printed correspondence. I said something to him which was extremely rude and clearly offended his dignity. He stomped off down the work surface to the other end of the room, turned to be sure that I had his attention, and slammed his paw down in a display of anger onto a nearby phone. The message to me was perfectly clear - "don't you think you can tell me what to do"! I again said something very rude to the cat and returned to my work.

Now, I should explain that the phone in question is one that is reserved solely for consular business. It is permanently on answerphone and I simply take messages off it several times a day as convenient. Normally the volume is always switched off. On this occasion I had used the phone shortly before the incident with the cat and had turned the volume on and had, mercifully, forgotten to turn it off again. I say 'mercifully' because as I turned back to my work, I suddenly heard the sound of my own voice shouting "you bastard cat!" In hitting the phone Tadek had not only managed to hit the precise button needed to record a new outgoing message he had actually held it down long enough to capture the complete 'message' which I had just unintentionally delivered. Had the volume slide been turned off I would have known nothing about the newly recorded change of message.

I sat there, shaking, trying to imagine the possible consequences. Imagine a tearful Polish girl who has just lost her passport desperately phoning a Consulate of the Republic of Poland only to hear the message "you bastard cat!" Imagine a senior British police office anxious to track down a Polish interpreter receiving instead the message "you bastard cat!" Imagine indeed Consulate General staff from London or even the Consul General himself phoning the Consulate in Kidderminster only to be greeted with the words "you bastard cat!" The mind boggles!

The same cat, Tadek, is perched by me as I write this. His gaze is solemn, impenetrable and apparently benign. I hope that he is not planning any further retaliation. I treat him with great respect these days!

5 IF FREEDOM THEN WHAT FREEDOM?

Sketches and Fragments of a New Poland With a Long History

- Driven to despair - Farewell to September - On Nowy Świat even the cats have literary ambitions - Z-Z (probably via Z) - Seven redundant concubines – "Do you want us to damage him badly?" - The Promised Land - I cannot come to you today - "You only want me to live for one more year?" - The first time we were eaten at a restaurant - Twinkle Inna Polish Stylee - Too much to remember - "Achy, breaky." - Wolf's Lair - We happen to have tickets for a concert"-Crib with field gun.

Driven to Despair

I will not claim that behaviour on the road definitely illuminates or reveals national character. It is, however, an interesting speculation with which to fill an idle moment.

British driving is an interweaving ritual of organised chaos, whereby participants noisily proclaim their right to individuality while, for the most part, strictly adhering in reality to the rules of the road. Germans, meanwhile, are fast, organised, and highly disciplined as they thunder along the autobahn. The glory of huge gas guzzling, highly polished, road dominating American Cadillacs is betrayed by their dented and pulverised fenders, which are so indicative of sloppy driving and sluggish automatic gearboxes!

Polish driving is different!

We are on the road from Wilkasy to Ryń deep in the north east of Poland. Normally, or perhaps notoriously, Polish roads consist of a single lane with an extra associated half width lane in each direction. The amiable driver of a slow vehicle, of which there are very many indeed, will gracefully pull over, without any change of speed, so that he is driving partially on this half lane and partly on the actual main carriageway in order to allow you to overtake astride the centre of the road. Today, however there is no half lane just the single narrow carriageway in each direction and so overtaking is more hazardous than ever.

I am in the front passenger seat of a right-hand drive Peugeot, designed for driving on the left in Britain and certainly not for driving on the right in Poland. So it is that in the front passenger seat I must make the decisions of life and death as to when to overtake but it is the driver who, with very limited visibility, must convert my poor judgement into accelerated action!

Fran is in the driving seat and I am next to her. Gosia is in the back of the car with tiny Michał and four-year-old Marcin. It is thanks to Marcin that we are listening, as we speed along in the mid-August heat, to a tape of the Smurfs' 'Christmas Hits' at high volume in Polish. For those who do not know, Smurfs are little bright blue cartoon characters who speak, and more unfortunately sing, with a high-pitched squeak. Today they are endlessly squeaking what sounds like "jing, jang, jong" to a tune that has only slight and passing resemblance to "Jingle Bells"!

Suddenly we are no longer travelling at speed. We have arrived at the rear of a 'convoy' travelling at a very low speed indeed.

Leading the convoy is a trio of typically Polish tractors. I am convinced that these beasts are especially designed so as to monopolise the whole carriageway at the lowest possible attainable speed.

Our convoy also contains three lorries of which two are just huge European TIRs which would be more at home on the autobahns and motorways of Western Europe rather than the narrow twisting turning lanes of north-eastern Poland. They present little challenge for a truly Polish driver. The third however is a real Polish convoy superstar - a truly monstrous long and wide lorry pulling an equally devilish trailer both heavily overloaded with what appears to be heavily polished wooden planks.

Behind the main body of the convoy, like a swarm of infuriated and frustrated bees, lurk no less than nine cars neatly tucked in at the rear. We become number ten.

In other countries driving may be about speed or panache but here in Poland driving is about one thing and about one thing only - overtaking! The art of driving in Poland is to sit as close as is possible (millimetres are preferable to centimetres) to the rear of the vehicle in front without actually touching it. One then draws attention to one's intention to conduct some stylish overtaking by continually pulling out, ostensibly to see if the road ahead is clear but in reality to scare the living daylights out of anyone foolish enough to be heading in the opposite direction.

Having exhausted preliminary foreplay, the ultimate moment of ecstasy and triumph comes as the driver finally pulls out, accelerates, and glides comfortably past the inferior snails, which were hitherto impeding progress!

The manoeuvre is only considered a total triumph if an oncoming driver is driven to the brink of heart failure and has to swerve to avoid imminent death! When one driver makes his 'move' several others will happily follow tailing him as closely as possible even though they have no forward visibility whatsoever and hence no knowledge of any oncoming traffic into whose path they are rushing on the wrong side of the road!

So, it is today and our nine unknown associates weave and buzz until the moment comes to make their respective 'moves'. At last, it is our turn and I proffer the long delayed advice "Go! Now! Put your foot down!" and half close my eyes. We pull out at full speed and start to hurtle past these tractors and lorries crawling along in their painfully sluggish inferiority. It is only then, to the accompaniment of a particularly painfully crescendo of "jing, jang, jong", that we see them

- in close formation, two abreast – white helmeted, blue patterned shirts, black lycra shorts - heads obsessively down - ten cyclists heading straight for us!

Farewell to September

We are approaching Warsaw after a long tiring drive from the northern lakes.

It is a hot mid-Summer Sunday morning approaching noon and I am drifting somewhere between sleep and wakefulness in the front passenger seat. Suddenly I am startled out of that cloudy dream world of half wakefulness. There are ghosts by the roadside. We are indeed passing a cemetery and full leaved branches from the graveyard trees overhang its railings and place the roadside footpath in deep shadow.

There, in the shade, rests a platoon of cavalry! The mounted troop is at a standstill. The horses are at rest.

To the front their officer is tall, slim, languidly relaxed, his sabre casually dropped at his side. It is as if the old sepia photographs have miraculously taken colour and come to life. Everything is as it should be - the distinctive long tight highly polished Polish cavalry boots; field brown uniforms; zigzag insignia; and those distinctive square Polish Army caps. The lances carry pennants of amaranth. Amaranth is a peculiarly Polish colour - a deep shade of red, which has been touched with purple. It is the colour of fiery skies in the moments before sunset. It is also the colour of Poland's national twilights and sunsets. Amaranth was the colour of the banners of the Polish Legions, which fought in vain for a free Poland under the Emperor Napoleon.

Amaranth was the colour of so many pre-war cavalry pennants and of the identifying markings of the elite First Józef Piłsudski Cavalry Regiment. Zbigniew Herbert had remembrance of such things when he wrote his 'Farewell to September':

The days were the colour of amaranth
shining like the lance of an Uhlan
Over the megaphones was sung
an anachronistic ballad
about Poles and bayonets
A tenor struck like a riding-whip
and after every verse
a list was published of live torpedoes
Who nota bene
through six years of war
were to smuggle lard -
pitiful unexploded bombs
The commander raised his eyebrows

like a mace
and chanted: not one button
The buttons mocked:
We shan't give we shan't give the boys
sewn flatly on to the heath

To Poles cavalry have a special significance - the knights of Władysław Jagellon triumphant over the Teutonic Knights at the battle of Grunwald; the winged Huzaria of Jan III Sobieski saving Vienna from the Turks; the Polish Lancers seizing the mountain pass at Sommo-Sierra in the face of Spanish cannon; the victorious cavalry of Piłsudski annihilating the mounted Soviet hordes in the 'Miracle on the Vistula' in 1920; and the doomed heroes 'sewn flatly on to the heath' in the early days of that September of 1939. Indeed, it is on the morning of August 15th – Soldiers' Day, the anniversary of the 'Miracle on the Vistula' - that our ghosts have chosen to make their remarkable manifestation. Polish cavalry were the cherished symbol of Polish independence and military glory in the bittersweet interwar years of the Second Republic.

On this Sunday morning, two years before the end of the 20th Century these horsemen may be the reality of flesh and blood but at the same time, they recall truly only the faintest of passing ghosts - a tiny, fractured image of past glory and sorrow - a fond reminder of what was and what is no more - and yet, for a moment, the heart beats stronger.

These ghosts will always trouble me. As an Honorary Consul of the Republic of Poland I must smile politely yet again at that oft-repeated question "and did Polish cavalry really charge German tanks in 1939", or even "did Polish cavalrymen really think that German tanks were made of cardboard?" I smile knowing that however clearly I answer these questions today they will be asked with equal earnestness tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, so inseparable have these myths become from the very name of Poland.

Actually, the latter myth is quickly nailed in all its glorious absurdity as every pre-war Polish Cavalry brigade actually had an armoured troop attached to it and had experience of working with tankettes and motorised units in the Spring manoeuvres of 1939, in the months leading up to the outbreak of war. Contrary to popular western imagination cavalry units only accounted for about 10% of the pre-war Polish army and cavalry units were intended to deploy and fight on foot. The horses, much loved in displays, were in reality simply to facilitate fast movement across difficult terrain and large distances.

And what of those cavalry charges? That legend of Polish Cavalry

directly charging German tanks was happily propagated by the Germans as an indication of pure Polish stupidity and interpreted elsewhere somewhat more generously as the ultimate demonstration of foolish over-romantic Polish heroism. What then was the truth?

On the lst of September 1939 the 18th Polish Lancer Regiment had suffered heavy losses in its defensive action against the German 20th Motorised Infantry Division. By late afternoon, with a company of tankettes of the 81st Armoured Troop the 18th Lancers were holding the most northern Polish positions near Chojnice while the remainder of the Pomorska Cavalry Brigade fell back southward. The Regimental Colonel Kazimierz Mastelarz had already sought permission to fall back across the Brda River, which was in his rear, to a more easily defensible and less risky position. Permission had been refused. By late afternoon Mastelarz decided he had no choice but to take some sort of active initiative on his own. Abandoning the broken down tankettes he mounted half his men, giving him a force of less than two normal line squadrons. He aimed to outflank German infantry positions and take them from the rear. At about 7.00 in the evening the Poles came across a German infantry division in a forest clearing. Determined upon a surprise attack, Mastelarz swept into the clearing with a mounted sabre charge that annihilated the German units only to fall foul in turn of German armoured cars, which had chanced on the scene. The Polish Cavalry were no match for automatic cannon fire and some twenty cavalrymen, including Mastelarz, fell as the Poles hastened to withdraw to safety.

The following day the scene of the action was visited by Italian war correspondents, who happily believed the stories of their German hosts that the Poles had died charging German tanks. The story may indeed have actually originated as a German jibe at the willingness of the Italians to believe anything they were told and may only later have mutated into a useful propaganda story to demonstrate Polish military recklessness and foolishness.

Such was the origin of the legend.

Other skirmishes between German armour and Polish Cavalry saw the Poles deploying anti-tank rifles from dismounted positions.

While the myth lives on Steven Załoga and Victor Madej (“The Polish Campaign 1939”) note sadly “*it has long since been forgotten that, on the evening of 1st September 1939, one German motorized infantry division was on the verge of retreating ‘before intense cavalry pressure’. This intense pressure was applied by the 18th Lancers, which had already lost 40 percent of its strength in the day’s fighting and was only a tenth the size of the opponent.*”

Poland's military tragedy in 1939 lay not in the foolishness of its soldiers and commanders. The Poland of 1939 had existed as an independent state for just twenty years. Poland had just twenty years in which to recover from the destruction of the First World War and the preceding century of partition. Despite the fact that Poland spent a higher proportion of its budget than its neighbours on defence that sum was dwarfed by the riches of those neighbours. The Poles did what they had to do. They planned for a limited defensive campaign to slow down the invader while awaiting the promised immediate military action from western allies. It was the weakness of the Polish economy, the strength of their foes and the non-arrival of their allies which defeated them. I hope that Kazimierz Mastelarz and his fallen troopers rest peacefully unaware of the manner in which their heroism has been posthumously distorted to suit the convenience of myth.

We speed on towards Warsaw and the ghosts along the roadside give way to the huge American style advertising hoardings which have mushroomed to pollute the closer approaches to the capital city.

On Nowy Świat even the cats have Literary Ambitions

There is one question to which I am unable to extract an answer from my Warsaw friends and acquaintances. Indeed, they look at me with total incredibility as if to say, “What is he talking about? Can such a thing really be happening in Poland and here in Warsaw?” The question is simply why are there resident cats in so many Warsaw bookshops? Fran’s theory is that the cats may originally have protected the stocks of books from gnawing rodents. Personally, I would have thought that self-respecting rodents would have found productive targets such as bakers or food shops for their gnawing exertions Now Warsaw like all Polish cities is a city of bookshops. Poles are omnivorous readers and books are comparatively speaking extremely cheap when compared with the U.K. This is a country where book shows and top selling new releases can feature on the national television news. There is a huge and regular outpouring of books from the publishing houses. Warsaw boasts a huge and regular book market and there are bookshops everywhere even tucked away in the most unassuming of minor city centre cul-de-sacs. Some bookshops are huge. The two big Empik stores in Warsaw (on Marszałkowska and Nowy Świat) are enormous newsagents, superb and hospitable bookshops (the one on Marszałkowska provides comfortable chairs and convenient tables for users) and are certainly the best shops in the city for CDs, DVDS and Videos. However, they do not so far as I know offer employment and accommodation to small felines.

The city is however littered with many smaller bookshops some general and some specialist in stock. British visitors struggle to remember to pick up small plastic baskets upon entering into which to place the fruits of their browsing before heading for the check out. It is in some of these that one finds cats. Tucked away on Piwna in the Old Town is a fine little bookshop specialising in art and antiquarian books. This is home to a large black cat, who luxuriates on a large polished slightly hollowed out tree trunk. He will graciously allow visitors to stroke him and, when in a particularly good mood, he will with the slightest gesture of the paw indicate which of his soft toys, suspended from sticks fixed to the edge of his tree trunk, he would like you to tap so that he can then pat lazily at the object swinging before him.

On Nowy Świat there is a rather snooty purveyors of stationery and such who still operate on the old communist shopping system. You select the goods which you wish to purchase and duly hand them to a shop assistant of distinguished years who clearly regards herself as your social superior and therefore behaves accordingly. She in due

course retains your goods and gives you an invoice which you take to a separate cashier seated at a till and protected from contamination by customers by ample glass screens. She will grudgingly accept both invoice and cash and provide you with a receipt with which to reclaim your purchase from the original shop assistant, but only when she has finished patronising the queue of customers which has built up in the meantime. This system is now mercifully almost extinct in Poland and here it is performed not as if it is a hangover from the communist days but rather as if it is a lingering tradition from some gracious and unhurried age when customers knew their place. Needless to say, the black and white cat which sits on the counter at the far end of the shop delicately grooming itself with leisurely grace, does not deign to be stroked by mere customers.

Nowy Świat (in English 'New World') is a strange mixture of everyday city centre bustle and gracious, stylish and expensive shops. Its evident capital city sophistication contrasts oddly with an agreeable and relaxing tang of provincialism. The latter stems from the fact that the post-war regime limited the height of its rebuilding to a modest three stories rather than the grander heights of pre-war times. The relatively low skyline combines with the broad pavements to give Nowy Świat an impression of spaciousness, which makes it far more relaxed and less crowded than London's Oxford Street. It is difficult to reconcile that impression with the American study of a few years ago which shows that Nowy Świat can claim more 'foot falls' than either Oxford Street or the Champs Elysees! The Blikle Café on Nowy Świat, which opened its doors for business in 1869, is with its famed donuts, a favourite meeting place, although today it faces stiffer competition than ever before from the newer bars and cafes which are springing up like cheeky upstarts all around.

It is logical that there should be literary cats on Nowy Świat. After all it was just round the corner that the cat Ivan, much referred to in his book 'New World Avenue and Environs" resided at the home of Tadeusz Konwicki. Just a few minutes' walk away, heading back towards the old town, is yet another bookshop which boasts the most magnificent tabby cat. If he is in the mood to be admired, he can generally be found lying between books on one of the tables, fully stretched out to take advantage of any summer breeze wafting through the open door. If he is tired, he may be tucked away on the bottom shelf of a bookcase. Sometimes he can be found sitting quietly, perhaps alongside a friendly girl student who is sitting on the low internal steps reading a prospective purchase, while absent-mindedly stroking behind his ear. Sometimes he can be seen curled up and sleeping in the smaller of the shop's two windows which is about three feet above ground

level. If staff notice he is in the window, they may put a little hand written sign next to him which says “Please do not tap on the glass. I am trying to sleep”. A year or two ago we were leaving the shop and noticed a drunk standing outside some feet from the window, and obviously transfixed by what he saw. Unwashed and scruffy he clutched a bottle in the one hand while making hugely exaggerated gestures at the window with the other hand. He was rocking backwards and forwards on his heels to the amazing degree, that only a total drunk who has lost all fear of falling can actually accomplish. He was booming at the top of his voice “Look, look! It’s a cat in the window! Look, look it’s sleeping - and look- it’s written a sign”.

z to Z (Probably via Z)

The English horror of the Polish language (all those consonants and all those z's) was well expressed recently in an English magazine cartoon which can be summarised in words as follows:-

Map books of the great cities of the world:-
London A-Z
London (cab drivers edition) A-B (via Z)
Vatican Alpha – Omega
Baghdad Z-A
Milton Keynes A-Zzzzz
Warsaw Z-Z

In her glorious 'Xenophobe's Guide to the Poles' (Oval Books) Ewa Lipniacka notes ominously "there are reported cases of foreigners managing to pronounce Polish words, but not many". The critical differences between English and Polish pronunciation are that in Polish there is a far, far higher ratio of consonants to vowels than is the case in English and in Polish every letter is pronounced and emphasis is always on the penultimate syllable. Contrary to English misconceptions, Polish is not all 'z' and 's' but a lot of it is. Combinations such as 'sz', ´'cz' and 'rz' are notoriously difficult for native English speakers. Beware of any Pole who wants to teach you to say in Polish "a bug is buzzing in the reeds" as it is thought to be one of the most difficult foreign expressions in the world for a native English speaker to attempt. Beware also of smiling Poles who would teach you the odd useful word of greeting. If an otherwise completely respectable elderly English lady comes out with a particularly foul piece of Polish abuse it is a clear sign that she had a Polish boyfriend with a badly misplaced sense of humour during World War II!

By contrast the Polish terror of English is expressed in the wartime Polish joke about the Polish soldier who shot himself on the top deck of a London bus. He had struggled nobly to master 'through' threw' and 'through'. To Poles English sounds slurred and pronunciation ill defined. Thinking he had at last mastered the English language, he was finally driven to suicidal despair when the bus drove along Oxford Street past the Academy Cinema which was displaying a huge sign proudly proclaiming "Lawrence Olivier's HAMLET - PRONOUNCED SUCCESS!"

Seven Redundant Concubines

A few years ago, the Polish President made a comment in a major speech to the effect that, “the reason for Poland’s existence is to join the European Union”. Had a British Prime Minister made a similar comment in relation to the United Kingdom he would have been regarded as barking mad and not just by extreme right-wing Tory Euro-sceptics. In Poland the comment did not even make the slightest ripple. It was generally seen as a self-evident truism not requiring further comment or elucidation.

In reality President Kwaśniewski was simply re-stating in modern terms the traditional foreign policy of every independent Polish Government down the ages.

The critical moment in Polish history came when the first historic Prince of Poland, Mieszko I, converted to Christianity in 965 and so brought his country into mainstream Christian Europe. Our priests and our Polish fancy would like us to believe that this was a simple matter of the King’s dramatic personal conversion to Christianity. The reality was of course far more complex.

According to the great Polish Medieval chronicler Jan Długosz, Mieszko was seeking to strengthen his position through a marriage to the daughter of the Christian Boleslaw of Bohemia who was a Christian. The response from Bohemia was that Mieszko would have to abandon his pagan ways, “dismiss the seven concubines with whom he currently enjoys carnal love” and convert to Christianity. A heated debate ensued amongst Mieszko’s advisers and spin doctors. Several were against accepting a new suspect faith, others worried that they would not be able to meet the high moral standards demanded by Christianity, while yet others deplored the loss of freedom entailed by submission to the strange new religion. A decision was deferred overnight allowing “time enough for Divine Providence” to conveniently “inspire them to accept the Christian faith…”. In other words, they had slept on it and by the morning had realised that whatever their personal reservations, it all made overwhelming political sense. Mieszko converted the whole nation in one fell swoop and so secured his new religion, his new bride, and his much-needed political alliance in one neat, tidy, convenient package. The crucial point was that he took Christianity from Rome and not from the East. This tied Poland into the whole mainstream of European, diplomatic and church structures, relationships and opportunities that came with allegiance to the Church of Rome. Henceforth Poland always saw itself as the bulwark of real Christianity and of European civilisation against the heathen east. This was the stance adopted by Jan III Sobieski when

he rushed to save Vienna from the Turks. Hence too the romantic 19th century conceptualisation of partitioned Poland as the 'martyred among the nations', who suffered for all.

This is also the explanation why the victory over the Soviets in 1920 was seen by many Poles not only as a great military victory won by the military genius of Józef Piłsudski but also as a triumph of civilisation and Catholicism over the heathens - hence the popular description of the victory as 'The Miracle on the Vistula'. Of course, it also suited the Polish right to try and give the glory to God, rather than to Piłsudski.

Charles Phillips, an American observer of events in the Warsaw of 1920, was swept along by the religious fervour describing how at the moment of greatest danger to the Poles at Radzymin just outside Warsaw:-

"*Father Ignatius Skorupka, a volunteer chaplain with that volunteer regiment, went into the fight with his men. They were decidedly 'his' men, for scores of the young fellows in the 236th were his pupils in school. He was teacher of Christian doctrine in one of the largest academies in Warsaw, and when the volunteer army was organised he insisted on going with his boys with whom he was enormously popular, being their scoutmaster and their leader in sports and athletics as well as their spiritual mentor. He went into the fight with them as a matter of course. But the ordeal they faced was so terrible, the fire from the Red guns so withering, they began to waver, even in spite of the awful fate of disgrace which had just been meted out to their defeated predecessors in the attack (allegedly a regiment which had just been đisbanded and its officers shot for not showing sufficient fighting spirit). Human flesh and human spirit, even so ardent as that of these untried but daring young volunteers, could not endure the blaze of flame and steel that confronted them. An American officer here who witnessed the attack, which began about one o'clock Sunday morning, told me that never on the Western Front, when the Germans were relying almost wholly on machine-gun warfare, had he seen so formidable and bitter a fire as the Bolsheviks put up at Radzymin.*

"The Poles wavered. Father Skorupka saw the wavering. Not alone Poland and Warsaw, but the honour of his regiment, of 'his boys', was at stake. With his surplice and his stole over his uniform, and suddenly lifting his crucifix high in the air, he leaped ahead of the front line, shouting to them to come on.

"One of the officers of the regiment, a seasoned veteran of the last six years, says that I have seen many courageous officers in battle, but never have I seen a man lead troops on as Father Skorupka led them. Under the

shock of his magnetic voice and action, the Poles advanced. But the Bolshevik fire again drove them back. Again, the chaplain led. Again, they advanced - and then fell back. Still again. And yet once more. Four times, with his crucifix high above his head, where all might see it, and his voice shouting in the names of Jesus and Mary to come on and save their homes and their people, the young priest led his regiment. Four times! The fourth time there was no wavering. On they went. There was no more falling back. Radzymin was retaken. But it was over the bullet-pierced and bayoneted body of Ignatius Skorupka."

It is not surprising that 'The Miracle on the Vistula', the first totally decisive victory of Polish arms since the relief of Vienna well over two hundred years before, burned such a strong and formative image into Polish national consciousness in the twentieth century. It is a symbol of the strength of the nation, which is potently visible on Warsaw's Piłsudski Square each Independence Day and Soldiers' Day.

The fate of Poland in the Second World War is also often described in messianic terms as 'Poland's Golgotha' or 'the Golgotha of the Polish nation'. Although this time the enemy is not from the east the struggle is again for the values of mainstream European civilisation and Christianity against the forces of barbarism and darkness which would destroy them. The most evocative and moving image associated with the massacre of thousands of Polish officers and intelligentsia by the Soviets at Katyń and elsewhere is an image of the Virgin Mary. Tears fall from her eyes, which are full of infinite sadness as she cradles in her embrace the head of a Polish officer who has been shot through the back of the head.

Throughout the long post-war decades, the Roman Catholic Church in Poland made it clear to everyone that, whatever a Soviet puppet government in Warsaw might be doing, Poles should still be looking to Rome and to the West. The eagle might have been deprived of his crown but he still looked westwards. Incidentally a joke of the Martial Law period neatly summed up the insoluble dilemma facing the communists. Jaruzelski returns from Moscow to meet the Central Committee of the increasingly inappropriately named, Polish United Workers Party. He tells the comrades "Well, there is good news and there is bad news. The good news is that we can put the crown back on the eagle. The bad news is that the eagle will have to have two heads". I do not want to labour the point but for anybody not in the know the old Tsarist Russian eagle was a suitably crowned but two-headed beast!

Since the fall of communism Polish foreign policy has remained quite remarkably consistent. The Presidency went from right to left and

then left again. The government has gone from right to left to right again and back to left! The foreign policy remains effectively exactly the same. The first major objective has been achieved.

Poland is now a member of NATO.

Stop and think for a moment. In 1985 while the communist government staggered on, Polish membership of NATO would have seemed a figment of a badly disturbed imagination - totally and utterly impossible and completely unachievable. Even in the early 1990s under a new democratic government it would have seemed like a long-term dream - something that might possibly just be achievable but way ahead in the future. Say it again slowly, precisely and careful because it is true. It has happened. Say it again very carefully.

Poland is now a member of NATO.

Like most observers I got it wrong. You see we all made the same mistake in those early days of the gleaming new Polish Third Republic. We thought that Polish membership of the EU would come first. It was still a long, long way ahead but it would come first. Polish membership of NATO would, we thought would be much harder, because of Russian opposition.

We got it wrong. When push came to shove Russian opinion was of no consequence whatsoever. Russia had ceased to be a major player at least for the time being. Polish entry into NATO was costly for Poland and NATO but in the great scheme of things the cost of the necessary changes and integration is relatively small change.

While I was delighted by Polish entry into NATO, I was for the first time truly apprehensive about the way things were going. There was an argument, which said that Poland had been ‘given’ what it needed - military security within NATO. The more complex and troubling issues surrounding Polish membership of the EU could, therefore, be put off until some distant date.

Indeed, in a way Polish entry into NATO has taken the heat out of the need to enter the EU. Something has been achieved and that is indeed progress.

The true reality however is this. A void - a dangerous void not just for Poland and her immediate neighbours and for Britain and for the whole of Europe – will continue to exist until Poland and its central European neighbours are totally integrated into mainstream European institutions and that must mean full Polish membership of the EU.

Currently the proposed date for Polish entry into EU hangs like an unresolved haze on the horizon. It is at risk of postponement for two

very different reasons. Firstly, it is always at risk from the jerky progress of actual real negotiations between Poland and her potential partners already inside EU. All of that is of course important and must of course be addressed. That however is not the real issue. The real issue is the political willpower of the major existing members of EU. Are they serious about EU extension or is it to become a football in their main game of trying to score points and advantages at each other's expense? If it is the latter then ultimately Poland and EU will face really serious difficulties. It has taken EU governments a long time to realise what this extension is about. Of course, at a serious leadership and Foreign and Commonwealth Office level the British know the score. Many of their backbench M.P.s, let alone the general public and business interests, have failed to get the message. The extension of EU is not about tinkering with the existing boundaries of EU - adding a few tiny villages here or there on the eastern boundary. This extension is about adding one hundred million people to EU. This is a huge radical change, which will alter the EU and its internal checks and balances forever. It will offer enormous possibilities and opportunities for existing members. It will bring new vibrant partners into play within EU.

From time to time there is speculation about a phased extension - that other countries may enter before Poland. That would be a disaster. Firstly, Poland is by far the largest and most complex of the economies lining up to come into EU. Forty million of that expected and prospective influx of one hundred million new partners in EU are Polish. Secondly, it is inconceivable that the Poles – who were the key players in bringing down communism in the first place and who have undergone such enormous economic sacrifices in the cause of free market economic reform – should stand by with noses pressed to the glass as others push in ahead of them. The resultant message as to how little they are valued by supposed EU allies would have a devastating impact on Polish public opinion and who could blame them?

Let us be absolutely clear. Poles are not looking for a free ride. Yes, of course, like everyone else, they are hoping for a better future for themselves and for their children. Yes of course they hope that NATO and EU membership are the key to achieving those aspirations. But they are not fools. They do not expect the streets of EU to be paved with gold. All they ask is for a fair chance – for that 'even playing field' upon which the British are so keen when it suits them. Poles are prepared to endure the hardship of economic reform. That is what they are doing at this very moment. That is what they will continue to do. They do however expect a fair chance - a fair crack of the whip. It is in the interests of Great Britain and of the whole of Europe that they get

that chance. Anything else is unthinkable.

The British are slowly coming to the realisation that Poland is a large and potential market of forty million well educated, well skilled and well-motivated people. It is also the launch pad into the old Soviet Union. Britain ignores this potential market at its peril.

The Polish drive firstly to enter NATO and the still ongoing drive to enter EU is all a part of the same Polish policy objective. It is the foreign policy objective of Mieszko, of Jan III Sobieski and of Józef Piłsudski translated into a new century and into a new millennium. It is the age-old Polish drive to 'anchor' Poland into mainstream Europe. In that context Kwasniewski's words make perfect sense.

“Do You Want us to Damage him Badly?”

Travelling by car to Poland is much easier than people think.

We travel down from Kidderminster to the Channel Tunnel by way of a brief visit to my mother in Camberley in Surrey. Our aim is to board the Channel Tunnel train at about 9.00pm. That means that we roll off the train in France in reality one hour later but of course adding an extra hour for Continental time. So it is at 11.00pm that we hit the French roads with me reminding Fran, who does all the driving, that it would be better if she were to drive on the right hand side of the road. In fact, this late night start makes it easier for Fran to acclimatise to continental driving with little traffic on the night-time roads. We head up the French coast and into Belgium towards Ostend. Then it is towards Antwerp and through Holland towards Venlo and across into Germany. The objective is to be across the Ruhr before the Germans wake up. We snatch odd hours of sleep at parking spots alongside the autobahn and once through the Ruhr enjoy a good German breakfast with strong coffee at a rasthaus along the way taking the opportunity for at least a rudimentary wash. Then we hurtle across Germany heading for Berlin. On the well-ordered German roads targets are signposted so well in advance. The trick is to pick up the signposting to Hanover just as you enter the Ruhr and that will set you in the right direction for Berlin. We skirt Berlin to the south heading for Frankfurt-on-Oder on the Polish border. If we reach the border at 1.00pm we can be in Poznań by 3.00pm and in Warsaw by about 7.3Opm.

Polish road surfaces remain primitive and the few miles of real motorway flash past. Facilities have however improved beyond all recognition. Long gone are the days of infrequent petrol stations, petrol vouchers for westerners and filthy Russian petrol. Now huge gleaming petrol stations flourish everywhere. Forecourts are vast and planned with an ever-increasing amount of traffic in mind. Fuel is to western standards. All credit cards are accepted and most petrol stations boast bankomat machines that are generally fluent in Polish, English and French or German. Toilets are spotlessly clean and service station shops fully stocked. Best of all are the gleamingly clean, large, comfy petrol station cafes. The coffee and snacks are excellent and cheap. Sorting out the road network is a national priority, which needs to be addressed with urgency - particularly the need for main north-south and west-east motorways - but the transformation in the quality of service at stations is nothing less than miraculous.

If you prefer to travel by air then Warsaw is only ninety minutes away from London’s Heathrow Airport. British Airways and the Polish national carrier LOT (simply Polish for ‘flight’) cooperate on joint

ticketing. LOT's fleet of Boeings are as modern as BA's and the service is equally good but I have to say that I prefer LOT's food and drink.

We have only ever had one bad journey to Poland. It started badly in Ramsgate. Ramsgate is a sort of sad leftover from the 1950s and badly in need of a lick of paint. We were sitting in a bar eating and drinking leisurely as we watched a cross channel ferry leave. Fran looked at her watch and said "It's 9.45pm so we've still got an hour until our ferry leaves at 21.45 hours". It took a few moments for Peter and I to work out that 9.45pm is of course 21.45 hours and that we were sitting relaxing watching the departure of the ferry which we should have been on. In memory of this achievement, I later bought Fran a watch from the Science Museum in London. It has a cartoon of Einstein in the centre and around the edge the numbers are labelled as "lish", "2ish", "3ish" etc., as this watch is of course operating - rather like Fran - in strictly 'relative' time!

We caught the next ferry and duly arrived in Ostend to set about the car journey through Belgium, across Holland and Germany and on into Poland. We were driving through the night and so it wasn't until the early hours of the morning and daylight that I was to notice the rather strange phenomenon that was to haunt us across Europe. In the far distance in front, behind, left and right we could glimpse clear blue skies. Over us however was the most enormous dark rain cloud. The pouring rain accompanied by occasional lightning and thunder was continuous. Strangely whenever we paused - for food, toilets, or rest – and for however long we paused - the rainstorm paused too exactly over our heads.

As soon as we started to move it started to move with us!

We made Gdańsk early evening. The Orbis-owned hotel had been warned that we would be late and had promised to keep a room for us. They had not done so. After a heated negotiation they offered to accommodate us at a similar establishment in Gdynia just up the coast. We were exhausted so I travelled in a taxi paid for by the hotel in order to lead Fran and Peter with our car through the short but complex and by now ill-lit journey to Gdynia.

The following day we took a taxi to Gdańsk and spent an enjoyable day sightseeing. We decided to return to Gdynia by train and on the journey, Fran had her handbag 'dipped'. Fortunately, only cash and not credit cards or documents were stolen. We returned deflated to the hotel and agreed that we would all have a break to wash and change and then Fran and I would meet up with Peter in the bar.

Fran was luxuriating in the bath when the phone rang. The voice

was unknown and the accent was German. “I am sorry” he said “but are you the owners of the dark green Peugeot in the Hotel Car Park?” He had it seemed just backed his car into ours! We arranged to meet in thirty minutes in the hotel lobby. Our German friend proved to be a senior insurance executive. Details were exchanged. Forms were completed and faxed from the hotel office. He bought us drinks. When we returned to the U.K. some six weeks later the insurance cheque was already waiting for us.

This happy conclusion was still, for the moment, in the future. While Fran bathed rather more hurriedly than she had intended I phoned Pete and together we set off ahead of her to view the damage before meeting our new German ‘friend’.

The car was in a sorry state. Our ‘friend’ had backed straight into the side of the car damaging both near side doors. It looked dreadful. Fortunately, it looked a lot worse than it was. Despite the damage the car was both driveable and secure. The proprietor of the Car Park was in almost in as bad a state as the car. He was shuffling nervously from one foot to another. He clearly expected to be blamed and to lose his car parking franchise from the hotel. We were anxious, depressed and deflated. He was desperate.

Since the end of communism Poles have convinced themselves that car theft is rife and yes there is car theft but perception has outstripped reality to an alarming extent. By the mid-1990s U.K. insurance companies were beginning to refuse to cover cars taken to Poland because of all the alarming reports they were hearing. Some judicious investigation at that time revealed that car theft in the Warsaw area runs at under 25% per thousand cars of the level of car theft in Coventry. Indeed, levels of all crimes in Warsaw run at under 25% of comparably based rates for Coventry. No, we are not picking on Coventry. It is just that comparable figures for Coventry happened to become available at just the moment we wanted them. Indeed, there is only one country in Europe that has outstandingly high car theft figures - the United Kingdom.

However, a valuable outcome of the Polish terror of car theft is the guarded car park. Effectively nearly all car parks in Poland are guarded car parks with high perimeter wire fences, fierce German shepherd dogs, barriers and a constantly manned entrance and exit. In villages a more modest, but equally effective, service may be offered by a pair of elderly Polish ladies and a less fierce German shepherd dog. Either way the service is cheap and effective. Hotels will often, as in Gdynia, have an adjacent freelance guarded car park available for guests with cars.

As we talked two very large gentlemen arrived. They were, shall we

say, somewhat informally dressed but serious looking. They were both carrying baseball bats. They had clearly been summoned ready for our inspection. The car park manager bounced nervously from foot to foot, almost incoherent with rage. “This German no leave till you say so”, he said. “We keep his car here till you say go. He no leave. My men - how hard should him hit?” Then clearly making an effort to regain his composure and total control of his English he paused, beamed at me and said, “Do you want us to damage him badly?”

The Promised Land

Originally built as a hostel, what is now the Hotel Hetman at Augustów opened at the very worst possible moment - the spring of 1939. It was to house German soldiers before reverting to its intended use. Decades of neglect meant that by the fall of communism it had a dismal, thoroughly run down and more than a little seedy atmosphere accentuated by the refusal of the management to replace burnt out light bulbs in the long, cavernous corridors. The building crumbled gently while the grounds had become overgrown through long years of neglect. Nevertheless, the building still possessed a faded and dilapidated splendour worthy of the first major creation of the architect who would go on to design the United Nations building in New York. The restored Hetman is now a comfortable if modest hotel, which serves a rather nice line in trout.

Lying on Lake Necko, Augustów is the place from which to explore the Augustów Canal. Built in the 19th Century it is a network of rivers, lakes and artificial channels running for some one hundred kilometres and originally intended to provide a trade route from the town through to the river Niemen. It is remarkable for its period in the way in which it blends into the landscape. This network can still be explored by kayak or pleasure cruiser today and transverses some of the most beautiful forest and lakeland landscape in Poland.

Drive north and you will find Suwalki, a sleepy border town. Some 11km south-east of the town lies Lake Wigry and the surrounding national park. We are there with Wojtek and Gosia and a local friend of theirs who knows the area well. We drive into the woods and pass very large and clear signs saying no admittance. We mention these only to be told abruptly that such signs are acceptable to real locals. Eventually we park and get out of the car. The forest floor is deeply and unusually pitted and uneven. This is the result of the First World War. One can still clearly trace the pattern of trenches - the front-line trenches, the communications trenches and even the forward gun positions. It is this inheritance that has saved these forests. When the Soviets wanted to exploit the area for timber in the 1950s and 1960s, they were unable to do so because they could not easily get logging vehicles and equipment in due to the uneven nature of the forest floor.

While I am trying to piece together the pattern and layout of these ageing and decaying trenches my Polish friends are wandering around separately, peering intently at the forest floor, occasionally stooping to examine a particular find more closely. They are looking for mushrooms. Poles love cooking and eating mushrooms and infinitely prefer to eat those that they have laboriously collected themselves. It is

a national obsession. Surprisingly few Poles, maybe just thirty or forty each year, die as the result of making the wrong decisions about which are in fact edible and which are poisonous. Poles will always tell you that they are “just looking for mushrooms”. I know better. If it were simply about finding a few mushrooms to eat then they would work together and systematically pick from a small area. But no, they wander around individually, carefully at a small distance from anyone else nearby. In reality each and every one of them is intent on being the Pole who first discovers the world’s most perfect mushroom. That is my theory and I am sticking to it. Years ago, when my cousin was a teenager, he came over to stay with my parents who lived at Camberley in Surrey. On the first Sunday morning of his visit, they awoke rather late to discover that he had disappeared. He returned some time later with a bag of succulent forest mushrooms. Where had he picked them? In the woods? Whereabouts exactly? He did not know. Could he remember any identifying clues? Well, there had been some bangs and, oh yes, a very tall flagpole flying a plain red flag. He had been picking mushrooms on the army firing range and the red flag was being flown to indicate that the ammunition they were using was live! Surprised by the ensuing rebuke he explained that it is of course always best to look for really good mushrooms in places where no one else goes!

Wandering on foot through the woods and along the lakeside, our local friend explained that it was very rare indeed that anyone came there. Fran tried to contradict him by pointing out that there must be regular visitors as we were walking on a broad straight neatly trimmed grass path. She was wrong. We were in fact walking along a beaver track - indeed the equivalent of a beaver motorway from the look of it. Rounding a corner, we were faced with the edge of the most enormous beaver lodge, which, we discovered later, has occupied this site for hundreds of years. A few moments later a pair of beavers emerged to stare at us curiously. They have so little contact with human beings that they have little fear of the very occasional visitor.

Projecting out into the lake on what was an island but is now linked to the shore is the huge church of a Camaldolite monastery originally founded in the 17th Century. The monks were evicted by the Prussians after the Third Partition of Poland. The church was a German vantage point and a Russian artillery target in the Second World War. It suffered accordingly but has now been beautifully restored. It is an exuberant piece of Polish Baroque. Monks’ skeletons are visible in the catacombs which are the only truly original part of the structure. The monastery is now a popular conference centre and hotel where it is possible to stay in one of the cells of the reconstructed hermitage - with

suitably modern en-suite facilities of course. Augustów itself possesses a large, colourful and ramshackle market. There is a normal collection of stalls selling all sorts of vegetables and produce from local farms. Other stalls sell cheap clothing and shoes. Others sell even cheaper toys and cosmetics. A few are selling unidentifiable engine parts and plumbing equipment. Standing at the side are a few elderly ladies from across the border. They talk mostly in Russian. They wear long plain gaudily colourful dresses, headscarves and shawls. They clutch handfuls of ill made chains of cheap reddish orange nine carat Russian gold that they are anxiously trying to sell. They look as if they come from another age and indeed, they could come from any time in the past two hundred years. The market office is a low plain unassuming building. On the flat roof is a pair of loudspeakers. They are blaring out Chuck Berry's 'The Promised Land'.

I Cannot Come to You Today

I have long believed that there is much to be learnt from the different ways in which different nationalities cope with the traumas and challenges of hatchings, matchings and dispatchings. Birth, marriage and death are after all the great rites of passage of most civilised society and even if the English seem to be giving up on marriage, even they have yet been unable to avoid either the former or the latter.

Now I am not proposing to go off at this point into folklore and ancient tradition - fascinating though that is. Rather I am talking about the differences in the modern approaches to these social hurdles.

English christenings tend to be rather sedate - at worst boring - affairs even allowing for the traditional 'wetting of the baby's head'. Such social gathering and drinking as there is after the service tends to be somewhat subdued and cautious.

Poles have far more fun.

After the Warsaw christening of my Godson Michał (Wojtek and Gosia's youngest boy) we returned to the flat on Targowa to find the table laden with meats and salads. The family tucked in manfully and as one magnificent dish was emptied it was replaced by another. Wojtek wondered around filling glasses. He was equipped with both good quality clear Polish vodka and my Aunt Wiska's highly praised homemade Wisniowka. He gave everyone else a sporting chance. With me it was different. "Come on Mike - let us drink together - yes? - one for one". When I agreed to the challenge, he attempted to fill my glass with Wisniowka. I promptly refused. There was no way I could keep up with him on that. On ordinary clear vodka I might just have a chance. It rapidly became clear that for every drink drunk by the others he and I would be having several 'toasts' to ourselves and with each there was no choice - just knock it straight back in good Polish style! Like playing poker it is a good idea to keep a straight face and give no clues away as to how you are doing.

I was still hanging in there when the table was cleared.

After what was already a superb banquet this was to be only a brief intermission. The table was quickly reset with turkey and all the trimmings. Now, unexpectedly, bottles of red wine appeared. I turned to my cousin and said "Wojtek - wine - let us drink together - one for one". I am not proud of the amount of wine I have drunk in my life but it is, shall we say, certainly a considerable amount. Wine is growing in popularity in Poland but it does not yet feature seriously in the

drinking habits of most Poles. Now we were on my ground. I could drink a glass of red wine almost as fast as Wojtek could knock back a vodka. It was a pleasure to see him soon afterwards comfortably laid out on a settee snoring gently. By the way please do NOT get the wrong idea. My magnificent and great-hearted cousin is NOT a habitual heavy drinker. Like all Poles however he knows how to celebrate. I am sure it is the only time I will ever get the better of him.

The essential difference between Polish and English celebrations lies of course in the difference in the preferred drinks and the difference in the way in which they are drunk. At a 'good do' the English will often be drinking pints of very good beer - or utterly despicable lager - which by their nature are relatively low in alcohol and are consumed relatively slowly. Otherwise, they may sip wine. Even if they are drinking whisky or other spirits, they will tend to sip them relatively slowly. At a 'good do' Poles will still tend to drink vodka, knocking it straight back - often with an appropriate toast. The difference in drinking style has a considerable impact on the nature of the associated social event. English weddings tend on the whole to be prim and proper with the occasional outbreak of mayhem. It is not completely unheard of for fights to break out. This is possibly the consequence of bringing together extended families, who do not really like each other, and putting them together in one room for a long-sustained drinking session. At Polish wedding receptions everyone is so locked into a never-ending sequence of toasts and the associated goodwill that there is never any time to get into trouble.

To my mind the English perform poorly at funerals. There is still the tendency to 'go back' after the service to a 'cold collation' consisting of ham sandwiches, cucumber and cress. The sparsely proffered glasses of sherry, or whisky if you are lucky, are offered on the strict understanding that they are to 'keep out the cold' encountered at church or cemetery rather than for actual enjoyment. The relatives may of course 'eye up' the valuables of the deceased in the hope that they will be coming their way but they will do this discreetly and go to great lengths to 'avoid trouble'. The Irish and the inhabitants of New Orleans are far more sensible.

Polish funeral 'dos' in the U.K. certainly tend to have far better and more extensive food and a very different attitude indeed to the associated drinking. Yes, the drink is to warm you up but it is also to help you relax into a warm glow as you remember everything you liked or loved about the deceased.

Occasionally however there are problems.

There was the case of the very elderly Polish gentleman who died.

The day after his funeral the equally elderly widow phoned the local priest to say that she needed to see him urgently the following day. The problem was that at that time - the late 1970s - the old man had some £20,000 hidden somewhere on the property. The only other person who knew the location of the money was the widow. The secret she wished to impart to the priest was almost certainly the location of the cash. Sadly, she herself died that very night - before the priest could arrive! There were no surviving descendants or relatives in the U.K. The only family were in Poland. They knew how much money there should be but had no idea where it was located. For them this prospective inheritance was a desperately needed fortune. The stalwart of that local Polish community, who had agreed to act as Executor, was trapped in an awful situation. He could not find or deliver the money that the family in Poland were now demanding. He and trusted friends took the house to pieces. Nothing was discovered. A couple of years later the rather dilapidated property was demolished in order to make way for a new development. The developers kindly allowed the executor and friends to attend the demolition and to search the rubble. Nothing was ever found.

On another occasion a friend of a newly deceased Pole walked into a Polish club in order to pin up a notice giving details of the news of the death and of the arrangements for the funeral. He then left. An hour later another friend of the deceased arrived and tore the notice down - furious that someone was interfering with the quite separate arrangements which he was making. Shortly thereafter a third friend arrived with similar but different information. It turned out that the deceased had given instructions and cash for his funeral expenses to three different friends in turn. Whether he was absent-minded or just taking precautions I have no idea. Later that week the three friends - having suitably arranged everything with the local Polish Catholic priest - were in the Club on the night before the funeral having a drink and finalising arrangements. A fourth friend arrived and they explained what had happened. The newcomer was convulsed with laughter to such an extent that he was eventually choking. They had to slap him on the back and pour glasses of water down his throat. He was still laughing. When he calmed down, he was eventually able to tell them what he knew and they did not know which was that the deceased was Jewish. There was no synagogue in the vicinity and no chance to make other arrangements. The priest concerned spent the night inventing a unique form of Polish Catholic-Jewish service! The deceased was duly buried.

On another occasion a funeral in one particular Polish parish came to at least the threat of violence. The deceased was a distinguished

veteran of the Home Army and the Warsaw Uprising. Tradition dictated that as the coffin left the church at the end of the service the organist should play a deeply moving wartime Home Army ballad ‘I Cannot Come to You Today’. The very young stand in priest from Poland refused to allow this on the grounds that it was not religious music and therefore not appropriate to a funeral. The organist, himself a distinguished Home Army veteran, offered the opinion that the priest would look strange conducting the service with two black eyes and a broken nose. I remember that at the end of the church service the playing of ‘I Cannot Come to You Today’ seemed to go on forever, and ever, and forever.

“You only want me to live for one more year?”

Every society, we are led to believe, does it differently. Eskimos, I am led to believe, rub noses while the English maintain very stiff upper lips.

Poles too have their own style.

The dashing Polish airmen and army officers of World War II charmed British girls of the period by clicking heels and kissing hands. If you are not born and bred to it this is much harder than you think. If you are English born the clicking of heels is an unnatural and foreign skill. If one is performing it after a drink or two it is even more difficult. Kissing English hands (ladies) is relatively easy because they are not expecting it and you are only likely to be doing it when she is in the company of Polish ladies. With Polish ladies it is far more difficult. The younger generation may consider it inappropriate. It is in any case for the lady to give the signal by the way in which she raises her hand. This signal is not easy to interpret if you are not born to it. Thus you make a last minute decision as to whether indeed to ‘shake’ or ‘kiss’ the hand. With most Polish female friends and acquaintances kissing the cheek is the proper option. The difficulty is to know whether it should be two kisses or three kisses and remembering which cheek you hit first as you kiss alternate cheeks. Make a mistake and you are likely to bang foreheads or, at least, noses instead. With men hands are shaken strongly. However, close male friends and relatives may embrace and kiss each other’s cheeks upon meeting after a long absence or saying farewell for a lengthy period. It is best not to ask Poles “How are you?” They might tell you! There are florists everywhere and flowers are always appropriate. Be careful. Chrysanthemums are there in the florists in enormous volume - because they are appropriate for cemeteries. Do not present them to your hostess for the evening. Odd numbers of flowers are appropriate as a gift on social occasions. Even numbers of flowers are appropriate for funerals and memorials. If you are invited to visit someone at their flat or house the current fashion is that it is always polite to take long stemmed flowers as a gift upon entering.

Polish hospitality is legendary and is well encapsulated in the popular sayings ‘a guest in the house, God in the house’ and ‘pawn everything, but make a splash’. There are only a few dissident voices that take the opposite stance of a guest in the home: ‘God knows what for’ or even ‘a guest in the house – a pregnant wife’. However, in reality Polish hosts rarely take ‘no’ for an answer as they ply you with drinks and snacks. Beware of the explanation “oh, it is just a little supper” which is often the coded announcement that you are about to

spend several hours at table faced by a seemingly never ending stream of dishes - of meats, salads, savouries and cakes.

In a bar you will simply sip your beer as you please just as you would do in the U.K. At a party or round the table drinking vodka is not a matter of sipping as you please, rather it is a partnership with those around you and will be acknowledged as such by the rest of your company. Raise your glass, turn to your companions, make a toast or simply say 'Na Zdrowie' (pronounced more or less as 'nah zdrovyeh'). At table you may notice that Poles handle their forks in a different manner to the rest of us. Fish is often eaten using two forks.

Poles also welcome any opportunity to break into the singing of 'Sto Lat' which is an invocation to the person so honoured, to live for a hundred years. This is the Polish equivalent of both 'Happy Birthday To You' and 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow'. There is the nice little story of Babcia's 99th birthday party. At the end of the meal the family rose to their feet, drank her health yet again, and broke into the singing of 'Sto Lat'. Before they had sung more than a couple of lines the old lady rose to her feet, her face twisted with fury. "What!" she screamed. "You ungrateful wretches! You only want me to live for one more year?"

Birthdays are rather private affairs and not much celebrated. Name Days – the day of the Saint after whom you are named - receive the attention usually given to Birthdays in other countries. The greatest advantage of Name Days is that they are impossible to actually forget. Polish diaries and calendars will always tell you the appropriate names for any particular date. Newspapers and web sites often list the day's Name Days.

In Poland the extended family still flourishes. This is partly due to tradition and partly due to the permanent post World War II housing shortages, which force the different generations of many families to reside together. In many families the parents are both working and so it is Babcia (Grandma) who plays a predominant role in bringing up the children. It is not unusual to see a whole gangs of Babcias relaxing in a Polish park while surrounded by a whole horde of tinies. This means that Polish children are generally respectful to their elders and are used to having older people around in a way that has been lost to many English families.

In traditional circles it is not done to express too much interest or admiration in some fitting or ornament in the home of your host or to your embarrassment, they may offer it to you and once offered will absolutely refuse to take 'no' for an answer. This is not an exaggeration. Before I understood the proper Polish conventions, I

made the mistake of acquiring such a gift!

Hotels in Poland today generally function at international standards. Hotel prices can however be a little puzzling. Essentially a large Polish hotel bearing the name of an international chain will quite happily accommodate the delusion of Americans abroad that the only way to secure American standards is to pay American prices. Down the road may be a more modest but also extremely comfortable establishment frequented by Poles paying Polish prices. The savings if you can find such establishments are enormous. They are also far more fun.

The days when western visitors grumbled about the fact that Polish hotels could never even manage to organise a plug for the bathroom sink are long since gone. The Poles have given in and now allow westerners to indulge in the perversion of their filthy habits. Poles wash their hands and faces in running water which is obviously clean and do not see the point of washing from a sink of increasingly dirty water. In newer flats mixer taps and plunger type plugs are common which suits everyone.

Poles are building houses everywhere. They will tell you rather snootily that nobody in Poland can possibly afford to build a house and this is all down to rich Polish Americans. The sheer volume of house building tells you immediately that this cannot possibly be true. Go to a remote village in the Southeast of Poland. Maybe there will be twenty or thirty cottages, which have obviously been there since before the war. Next to them will be ten or fifteen glistening new homes. A further ten or a dozen will be in various stages of construction. Another half a dozen or so sites for building will already be pegged out in the next field. The coherent development of large sites is obviously the work of speculative housing developers. In most cases however a family will have purchased a site and found their own architect and builder and simply got on with it. Many of the slower projects are clearly self-build, occupying weekends, holidays and long summer evenings.

Long trapped in tiny identical flats, the Poles who are now escaping by building their own houses want space and they want to make their house their own individual design statement. Terraced or linked housing will not do. A large piece of land with the house plonked in the middle of it is perfect. Unlike the British the aim, if you have enough money, is generally not to seek privacy behind hedges and trees unless you are very seriously rich or reclusive. No, I can now afford this so let's flaunt it! High railings and security cameras and lighting are fine. Let everyone else peer through the railings to see how well we have done. A common mistake in the initial excitement of

release from the restrictions of flat dwelling is to build more and larger rooms than necessary and to envelop the new home in an excessive succession of verandas and balconies. In extreme cases this goes completely to peoples' heads, leading to occasional outbreaks of the most unlikely housing design to be found anywhere in the world. One occasionally stumbles across new homes, which have been built to resemble castles complete with arched doors and windows, turrets and castellation. Unfortunately, these will nearly always be modelled not on the real castles of historic Poland. Rather the 'designer' (for surely no proper architect could ever have committed such a crime) has taken his model from the fairytale castle over which stardust is sprinkled in the opening credits of every Disney feature and, yes, the 'castle' is coloured bright pink. My 'favourite' one of these castles is quite extraordinary. The walls, battlements, turrets and spires (!) glisten and glare a particularly obnoxious and stomach-churning shade of bright pink in the bright light of a hot Polish summer day. The master-stroke – which gives this structure a horrible uniqueness even in the weird and wacky architectural genre of Polish mock castles and palaces - is the windows. They are absolutely huge and they are of course arched. They have used huge sheets of glass for the windows. This is not ordinary glass. It is that glass that you can see out of from the inside but which is impenetrable from outside. Set in these revolting gleaming sickly bright pink walls the glass is of course the brightest imaginable almost fluorescent neon shade of extremely bright blue!

The move from flat to house generally means moving out of city centres. That means first of all a greater distance to travel to work. Big city Poles are used to hopping onto a bus or a tram for the short journey to work. Public transport is cheap, clean, frequent and reliable. All of a sudden, they are faced with horrific twenty or thirty minute journeys to work. They believe Warsaw is gridlocked because they may run into a few moments delay. To us Warsaw is still a haven of free-flowing traffic. Kidderminster has more congestion and far greater delays than anything that any citizen of Warsaw could imagine. Nor could the Poles conceivably imagine the travelling distances, times and conditions, which we take for granted in the U.K. Travelling and road conditions are clearly a matter of perception. Big city Poles do not yet realise what is about to hit them. If the newly built house is out in the country, then local householders may be paying security guards to patrol the area. Strolling some way outside Warsaw in just such an area of well-protected plots with large new homes and obvious security I noticed one particular home. It was a huge lavish bungalow of quite stunning beauty. The layout of public pathways was such that it was possible to walk almost the whole way round the compound viewing exactly what was there through the great outer ring of railings. There

were well-groomed lawns, low freshly manicured flower beds and the most enormous swimming pool. Set in the garden were a series of almost Turkish looking little domed gazebos. There was security lighting and cameras visible everywhere on high posts giving them good vantage points across the whole site. Maybe ten feet inside the outer railings was much higher strong wire mesh surmounted with barbed wire. Strolling around the gatehouse (!) were four very large and powerful gentlemen in dark suits and shades on this boiling hot Polish summer afternoon. Subsequently I was told that this was the home of a notorious Polish gangster at that time in a private hospital in Warsaw recovering from a gunshot wound while the police waited to visit him. His British equivalent would have made his home as totally inconspicuous as possible hiding it from view behind dense and impenetrable shrubbery. Polish gangsters may worry about security, but, in this case at least, the message seemed to be if you have it flaunt it.

For most Poles however home is still a flat. Many Poles like it that way. Good city flats in Poland can be spacious, elegant and extremely well designed and furnished. Nearly all Polish homes will have polished wooden block floors sometimes of very complex and beautiful designs. Like most mainland Europeans they do not see the point of dust and bug holding wall-to-wall carpeting. Coming from Kidderminster - historically the great British carpet manufacturing centre - I report this with some sadness even though I cannot argue against the logic.

For most people flats are extremely small and Poles have mastered all sorts of special techniques for living in small urban flats. The first requirement is locks. Poles are terrified of crime and in some cases with good reason, although in reality they generally greatly overrate the problem. Poles do not put one lock on their outer flat door. They generally attempt to install as many locks as the framework of the door can possibly sustain. Not all of the locks of course may be in use. Some may be earlier fitments, which have been subsequently replaced but never removed. We have twice stayed over August in rented Polish flats; once on Piwna in the bustling heart of the Warsaw's Old Town and once across the Vistula in the suburban tranquillity of Saska Kępa. In both cases Wojtek and Gosia had kindly organised the flats for us and had obtained the keys ready for our arrival. In both cases we were faced by great bundles of enormous keys and no idea of which key fitted which lock, or indeed of which way to turn them. In the first instance Wojtek launched into the door with great confidence happily thrusting keys into keyholes and turning them with gay abandon. The problem was that while he was happily unlocking some locks, he was

happily locking others in apparently random patterns. It took us some time to make an entry. By the second visit I had learnt the lesson. You must approach the door carefully and with real respect. It knows its job. You first need to establish which key is at home in which lock and make sure that you will able to remember that. Then you try the keys in turn trying to work out by sound and feel which way each key needs to be turned and how far. In each case it is essential to remember how to return the lock to its original position so, if necessary, to facilitate yet another attempt. The next morning the first task is to open the door from the inside, which is generally a simple matter of levers and catches and practising opening and closing the locks from the outer side of the open door until you have got it absolutely perfect. Then I can start to relax.

The limited space in most city flats means that every inch has to be put to good use. The Poles are experts at installing fitted floor to ceiling shelving. In the flat on Piwna although the rooms were small the ceilings were extremely high. At first, I was puzzled as to how anyone could reach anything from the upper tiers of shelves and cupboards. There appeared to be no footstool or ladder in the flat. I had reckoned without the curtains. It had previously escaped my notice that the living room of most small Polish city flats have full length, heavy, floor to ceiling drapes which cover the whole of the wall either side of the actual window frame. Pull back the curtain and look at the wall behind and you discover that far from there being empty wall space there is in fact an ingenious system of hidden storage. On Piwna we found the necessary stepladder waiting for use neatly clipped to the wall behind the curtain. Other items of all sorts including racks of tools and all the necessary emergency items (such as fuses. tool kits, candles, first aid kits) can be cunningly stored in this way for easy access and retrieval. In one flat we visited even the bikes were neatly stored out of harm's way in such a manner.

Many flats are so small that there is not adequate space for the necessary number of beds. Poles therefore routinely resort to the use of settees, which pull out and convert into a bed at night. This is practical but means that there is the additional twice-daily chore of packing away and getting out both 'bed' and bedclothes. The simplest ambition of most Poles is to be able to afford a big enough property, be it flat or house, to have an adequate number of bedrooms with proper beds for everyone in the household. Having to have the children sleep in the same room as you puts an enormous strain on many young Polish families.

Given the circumstances it is remarkable just how many urban Poles manage to keep pets. Small dogs are reputedly fashionable in Kraków

but other Poles attribute this to the legendary meanness of the inhabitants. Elsewhere in Poland it is amazing to see very large dogs emerging from very small flats. Generally, however, dogs are regularly and conscientiously exercised as, to put it bluntly, if they weren't they would be absolutely unbearable in the flat.

The First Time we were Eaten at a Restaurant

Eating and drinking at restaurants in Poland is a delight! The old days of state owned shortages and food poisoning evaporated along with communism in 1989. Polish restaurants, cafes and bars are today inexpensive and absolutely hygienic offering first-rate food and drink and excellent service.

Polish cuisine has been sadly neglected in the west. Poland boasts an unchallenged range of native soups. Best known are the beetroot stock based Borsch and the cold Borsch with cream Chlodnik from the Lithuanian borderlands. Zurek is the distinctive Polish soup based on rye flour with mushrooms, sausage and hard-boiled egg. Poland is famous for its traditional wild mushroom Grzybowa served with noodles. These are only the best known of many dozens of soups. We have already mentioned the role of herrings and of bigos at the Polish table. Pierogi is the native Polish version of ravioli stuffed with meats, cheese or fruits such as black currants. Gołąbki is cabbage leaves stuffed with rice and meat and usually served with tomato sauce. Poles are particularly fond of all sorts of fish, pork and chicken dishes in all sorts of forms and presentations. Poland is also famous for its gingerbread, apple cake, cheesecake, donuts and poppy seed cake. Kremówka is the cream cake made famous by Pope John Paul II for whom it was a childhood treat. Polish sausages come in amazing diversity and the Poles yield to no one - not even the Italians - in their capacity for producing and enjoying marvellous ice cream.

Polish hotel breakfasts can be magnificent.

Łancut is a beautiful small town towards the Ukrainian border in South Eastern Poland. At the heart of the town is the market square where shops on four sides surround a grassed and planted centre. The little town is always buzzing with activity. The attraction of the town is twofold. Firstly, there is the magnificent Palace, which rivals Blenheim in splendour. The magnificent grounds also house a fine collection of Orthodox icons and one of the biggest and most important collections of carriages in the world.

The Pałaczyk is an old manor house, just a few moments' walk from both the market square and the Palace. It is now a small privately run hotel offering extremely comfortable accommodation at very reasonable prices in a charmingly relaxed and picturesque setting.

It also boasts an excellent restaurant and the small bar manages some great cocktails. The breakfasts are stunning. We ploughed our way through cheese and Polish meats accompanied by the usual diverse range of Polish breads and superb strong Polish coffee. The

coffee was accompanied by a local delicacy rather resembling a small loaf baked with a thick layer of jam at its heart. Agreeably full and satisfied, we were about to leave when the pan of scrambled eggs cooked on a thick layer of Polish ham arrived.

Fran argues that the breakfast at the Hotel Mrangowo on the Mazurian lakes is the best in the world. There is always a full range of fruit juices, breakfast cereals, breads, cheeses, Polish meats, fruits, preserves, frankfurters, fried eggs, herring, cold fish salads and cakes. Hard boiled eggs are available and coffee and tea await. A chef stands prepared to make your individual scrambled eggs to taste as you select from the various herbs, spices and other additives. It is the sheer range of the buffet that makes this a phenomenon. I remember watching a young married couple, for whom the honeymoon at such a hotel must have marked a very substantial financial commitment, slowly but steadily working their way through every last item.

Fukiers on the square in the Old Town in Warsaw is one of the great old Polish restaurants. You can dine in splendour in the lushly decorated front room or in the charming internal courtyard. The Rough Guide to Poland describes it today as “top-notch Old Town restaurant with a strong line in imaginatively reinterpreted Polish cuisine”. I agree. The dinners are marvellous but I love Fukiers best at lunchtime when if you are very lucky and early (Poles lunch later than the English) you may have the whole cool, cavernous and dim front room to yourself with the parrot dozing or whistling quietly to itself in the corner. The huge windows open on to the teeming sunlight and bustle of the Old Town Square. Then you can enjoy ‘apple cake’ (the bison straw flavoured vodka called Żubrówka with chilled apple juice) while waiting for your chłodnik (cold borsch with cream garnished with chopped chives and covering a sliced hardboiled egg). Then you can proceed to the entrée of your choice - maybe even wild boar accompanied by a good bottle of French wine which is now mercifully less expensive than it used to be, although the menu still warns foreigners, now unnecessarily, to check the price of wine before ordering so as to avoid a nasty shock when the bill arrives. The sweets are excellent and varied but it is the ice cream with fruit, which is as in many Polish restaurants a favourite dish. Finally, perhaps, a large Armagnac with the coffee.

Sitting there it seems impossible that this restaurant, like the whole square around it, is a reconstruction from the ruins and rubble of 1945 but so it is. Fukiers must be, in style and atmosphere at least, a remarkable reconstruction. In his ‘A Wayfarer in Poland’ which appeared in 1934 Moray McLaren described Fukiers thus:-

"There are many houses in the Rynek which are old and historic: probably the one which the visitor to Poland will see first and which he will enter most frequently is the Restaurant Fukiers, a magnificently ancient restaurant. It shares with one or two other restaurants the pride of providing the best cooking in Warsaw. Its lunches are famous and its dinners are even more famous. When the journalists of Poland wish to entertain the journalists of other countries - and who are better entertainers than journalists? - they always take their guests to Fukiers, where you may reserve small rooms for small parties or large halls at the back of the building for big ones, or you may sit in the restaurant in dark corners, and feed and drink deeply of the fine rich foods and ancient wines of this most hospitable house."

While Fukiers may not have changed it is clear from McLaren's account that the Old Town Square - one of Poland's major tourist attractions - has changed very significantly in style. In the early 1930s he wrote:-

"The Rynek is a square about half as big as Trafalgar Square in London. It is very, different, however, in appearance. The houses that go to make it up are medieval or early seventeenth century in appearance, full of all the luxuriance with which the architecture of those ages was profusely scattered. The luxuriance of the design, however, is outshone in the luxuriance of the colours. The houses are painted green, gold, scarlet, yellow and black. In places the colours are fading, in places the paint is peeling, in other places it shines out as brightly and as new as if it had been painted yesterday - and so it probably has been. But the colours are fantastically bold, bold in a way to which no Western European architect or town designer would dare aspire. The architecture of the houses is European, the colour is Eastern, and the effect is Slavonic, a fact which reminds one when one visits the Rynek that one is approaching the eastern boundaries of Europe."

I suspect that those who rebuilt the Old Town Square after World War II took the opportunity to mute the brightness of the colours. The houses are beautifully restored with immense attention to detail and small but fascinating architectural detail but the colours are more subdued than McLaren suggests. The impression is of faded pastel shades rather than scarlet or gold. Nor does the Old Town Square strike one today as eastern. Rather it appears clearly rooted in western European style reminiscent of Germany or Holland but with very distinctly Polish flourishes and overall character.

To feel that one is in the east you need to travel to Lublin where the old town is currently being carefully restored. Here it is not the Square or colours which move you eastward but rather the cobbled twists,

turns and passages and external staircases of the Old Town Complex. It feels strangely as if the old large Jewish community must have left only hours before one arrived. What Poles call Lublin Castle (the scene of horrific Nazi and Soviet atrocities in turn) sits on a separate hill just outside the main town and visible from the Old Town and in its design and shining whiteness resembles nothing less than a British hill fort of the Indian Raj.

Back in Warsaw's Old Town Square a great deal of space is taken up with various outdoor bars where one can sit in the shade of the huge umbrellas enjoying mid-morning coffee and apple cake, drinking a chilled Polish beer, enjoying a light lunch, or enjoying an evening drink or a nightcap in the warmth of late evening Warsaw. At one end of the square, artists sell paintings of varying degree of merit mostly depicting the street scenes you can see around you. It is still possible to occasionally find some good water colours, several of which now decorate our walls in Kidderminster. Round the square is a whole rash of bars, restaurants and souvenir shops. At one end of the square the frontages disguise the excellent Warsaw Historical Museum. Also on the Old Town Square is what is probably the finest amber shop in Poland where the Polish Government purchases its gifts for the most distinguished foreign women visitors to the county.

Just a short walk away from the Old Town Square you can find the Literacka with its street level café and basement restaurant located on the edge of Royal Castle Square. Here the little outdoor café is the traditional place to see and be seen although with the proliferation of other bars and cafes it no longer possesses the status of earlier times. The Europejski hotel overlooking Piłsudski Square has an outdoor veranda bar, which was a famed meeting place in communist days. Its slightly faded nineteenth century grandeur make it a comfortable place to stay. It has an adequate restaurant. On one occasion we had enjoyed a good late evening meal and had duly retired to bed. An hour or so later, and certainly well after midnight, there was repeated knocking on the door. When I eventually staggered out of bed and opened the door it was to find our waiter from earlier in the evening in an extremely distraught state. Had I got the copy of the bill for the meal, which I had signed to 'put the meal on the room number'? They could not find their copy downstairs and so could not close their accounts for the night. I offered to sign a replacement bill or to pay straight away by credit card only to be told that the system could no longer cope with this as I had signed one bill already. Would I go down to the restaurant and discuss the matter with the manager? I could have insisted on leaving the matter to the morning but I was curious and the poor waiter was in a truly dreadful state and clearly fearful of paying

for our meal or even losing his job. I dressed quickly and we went downstairs and through a now darkened restaurant into a gleamingly lit and polished kitchen. The Duty Hotel Manager was clearly suppressing his anger at the whole business while the Restaurant Manager looked worried. A young girl cashier was perched on a stool with a bored seen it all before and a 'when are we going to be able to go home?' expression. The waiter translated from Polish to English and from English to Polish. Had I signed the bill? Yes, I had. Had I got my copy? No, I had not and what is more I simply could not remember if it had been given to me.

It became clear that they were trying to puzzle out if I had left without paying or if the waiter was incompetent or up to no good. Choosing my moment, I belatedly handed my business card complete with Polish Eagle and the words 'Konsul Honorowy Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej' to the Restaurant Manager who passed it to the Duty Manager. The exchanged glances between them could be interpreted loosely as 'Oh shit, we've dragged a Polish Consul out of bed!' All of a sudden, I was offered a seat and a bottle ("Please, please, it is late and cold. Please, please keep helping yourself"), Would I mind waiting while the Head of Security was found. He duly appeared and the situation was explained to him. He immediately adopted the slightly pained air of an expert who should have been summoned to take charge in the first place. "This will I think be simple", he told me. "We should go back to basics. Please wait just one moment". He took the hapless waiter with him and they returned within a few moments with the Security Chief triumphantly clutching a plastic wallet containing both copies of the signed bill. I had signed the bill and left the wallet on the table and another waiter or waitress had swept it up and then simply put it on the wrong pile he explained. He then launched into a lecture in Polish on the stupidity of dragging paying customers out of bed in the middle of the night when you haven't first carried out simple basic checks. The embarrassed Restaurant Manager turned to me, apologised, and asked "'and what would you like me to do with this young man?" indicating the nervous waiter. "He's very good at his job" I replied. "We wouldn't have given him such a big tip earlier on if he wasn't first rate. The best thing you can do with him is to provide him with equally competent managers". The waiter and the security chief beamed.

All across Poland the quality of food in bars and restaurants is excellent and extremely good value for money.

Swinoujście is a holiday resort on the Baltic right on the border with Germany. Indeed, it is situated on an island tucked into the estuary of the Odra above Szczecin. The island is partially in Poland and partially

in Germany and can only be reached by a five-minute ferry crossing. The town buzzes with activity for toddlers, youngsters, teenagers, young adults and older visitors. The wide, clean, fine white sand beach slides gently into the warm summer waters of the Baltic. Orange lifeguard towers and clear safety markers in the water indicate that this is a safe and very well organised beach.

Behind the beach a narrow swathe of trees hides the beach from the broad promenade behind. Just behind the trees on the beach side of the promenade, where you can incidentally find the cheapest good quality amber jewellery in the world, there are several bars. The largest is a typical broad paved area covered with tables and chairs with large umbrellas to ward off sun and rain. The beer here is the local Szczecin brew - 'Boss'. As you sit at a table the waiters and waitresses flit around taking your orders for beer, other drinks, cakes and ice cream and deliver them to your table. Around the edges of the seating area are various little buildings and temporary stalls. It is possible to wander off and select the food of your choice to bring back to your table. From the largest of these you can purchase excellent helpings of cod, haddock, perch, sandacz (pike-perch), salmon, trout or mouth-watering fish cakes. These are served with chips, croquette or sauté potatoes to taste with mayonnaise, ketchup and pickled mushrooms. A nearby chicken rotisserie stall offers whole or half chickens ready to eat. At another stall a barbecue offers cooked kiełbasa (Polish sausage) or Shashlik - pork interspersed with slices of onion and tomato cooked served on a skewer. They also serve huge Polish pickled cucumbers -sliced but always simply picked up whole and nibbled - which are regarded by self-respecting Polish males everywhere as the perfect accompaniment to a chilled glass or two of good Polish beer.

For Fran the fish dishes are her idea of heaven. For me and for Wojtek a large portion of shashlik with chilled Polish beer and of course Polish pickled cucumbers represents the highest peak of human endeavour, achievement and total ultimate sensory satisfaction. Best of all such heavenly perfection comes at the most modest of costs.

Even in the tiniest rural backwater there can be culinary surprises. In the middle of nowhere we noticed a small shack proclaiming in both Polish and English the availability of 'Fish & Chip'. It looked a bit dilapidated but hungry. We stopped. At first, we thought that our worst fears would be confirmed. The only drink available was a sickly sweet pink coloured water which is unaccountably popular in Poland. The lady behind the counter explained that there would be a slight delay with the fish but, noticing our disappointment, then further explained that the fish were caught to order in the pond behind the 'bar'. Yes, the

fish could not have been fresher, finer or better cooked. As I have mentioned earlier roadside Service Station cafes can often yield food that is of a far higher quality and far greater diversity than their British counterparts.

A few years ago, we were at Swięta Lipka in north eastern Poland. The fine Baroque church boasts an absolutely magnificent organ. Across the green is a small bar and restaurant. Once written off as a gloomy dump it had by then become a rather niftily neat little privately run establishment. At the end of our meal, it was our turn to pay and so Fran produced her credit cards. Our Polish friend ridiculed the idea that a credit card could be used in such a rural backwater. Fran, however, had spotted the visa and master card signs in the window. To the great excitement of the staff, we were their very first customers to use a credit card for payment. On subsequent visits it has been full of German visitors - all, of course, paying by credit card.

In the big cities the diversity of restaurants and bars at very reasonable prices is immense. I love Italian food and some of the very best can, amazingly, be found at the little Restauracja Roma on Warsaw city centre's ul. Jasna. Over the river don't be fooled by the plain exterior, the Santorini Grecka Tawerna on ul. Egipska offers excellent Greek cuisine.

One of our favourite expensive restaurants in Warsaw is the magnificent Restauracja Polska tucked away in a basement off Nowy Świat near to the junction with Al Jerozolimska. The 'Eyewitness Travel Guide Warsaw' describes it accurately as '*One of the city's leading restaurants, the food is exquisite and the service excellent. The interior is stylishly decorated with antique furniture and many pictures. There is a good selection of soups, excellent chicken in a cream sauce and seasonable dumplings in chicken broth. Also worth trying is pierogi (Polish ravioli) with berries.'*

The same proprietors also run the equally excellent Dom Polski in the pleasant Saska Kepa suburb on the other side of the Vistula at ul. Francuska. The concept here is of rather more understated eloquence as if you are visiting an albeit extremely special Polish home. In Summer it is possible to dine by candlelight in the garden. In the Summer of 2001, we had a flat for August in the vicinity and so Dom Polski was a natural target for us. The food was truly excellent, the service was perfect and prices were relatively modest for such a high-quality establishment. Sadly, we had not only a terrible evening but also a terrible few days as a result of our meal there. If you are on the Polish lakes in the summer you expect mosquitoes. A couple of my childhood years were spent in Mombasa in Kenya and so I thought that

I knew everything about mosquitoes. I was not prepared for Polish mosquitoes. They are large, vicious and persistent! If we are on the lakes, we take precautions. We use the appropriate body sprays. Best of all are the 'plugs', which you insert into a turned on electric socket. A small tablet is placed into the socket and as it heats up the tablet the fumes released kill and best of all deter mosquitoes. The great thing is that is you sleep in a bedroom where such a 'plug' is in use then you will be protected from mosquito attack when you venture out for the whole of the following day.

In Warsaw we had never before met mosquitoes. We were not expecting mosquitoes. We were not prepared for mosquitoes. The mosquitoes were prepared for us. Warsaw in Summer is hot - very hot. Poles like to get out of the city just as we like to arrive. Usually however it is a dry heat, which is not at all tiring or exhausting. In the summer of 2001 the city was however not only hot but unbearably humid, even short strolls becoming a real effort. It was mosquito paradise. Mosquitoes had discovered Warsaw and they knew exactly what to do. Mosquitoes are cunning opponents. Their attacks start stealthily and slowly. I now suspect that a specialist breed of Warsaw garden restaurant and bar mosquito has mutated into existence. They do not attack immediately. They know that if they did you would move the table indoors or even go to a different restaurant. Instead, they play a waiting game. They lull you into a false sense of security. It is only when you have already relaxed with your aperitif and are halfway through your starter that they make their first tentative approaches. At first all you notice is the odd single itch, which passes almost unnoticed. Then perhaps you notice a second bite. The foe remains unseen. It is a garden after all, so a small insect bite or two is not unreasonable. The mosquitoes can now wait patiently. They know that their time is coming and it is coming soon. They wait until the main course has arrived, the vegetables have been served and the wine opened. They know that this is your moment of greatest weakness. You are anxious to eat while the food is hot and fresh. You are keen to try everything on your plate and to taste the wine. You are intent on discovering whether it is all as good as it looked on the menu and the wine list. You do not want to be distracted. Indeed, you will try to ignore distractions so as to concentrate on your meal. For the assembled mosquitoes you are now exactly the sort of target that the Japanese air force found at Pearl Harbour. You are vulnerable to massive, unexpected surprise attack. Within moments Fran and I are suffering. First it is arms and for the more daring even wrists and hands. Then it is necks and ankles. The most daring make it to the knees. For the kamikaze risk taker there is the full facial assault. Only afterwards do we notice that every other table has a spray, which has

been obtained from a table at the side of the garden. For us it is too late. We have been bitten. We will itch and scratch for days. The mosquitoes of Warsaw can relax. For them it was another mission accomplished - a job well done!

Club Magellan, just off Piłsudski Square, is one of a rather smart new generation of Warsaw restaurants. This is a restaurant of deep leather and smart wood. It is for businessmen who want to entertain and dine in smart surroundings. The food and the service are also excellent. It was here that I disgraced myself. We were entertaining Wojtek and Gosia. In mitigation I plead that it was partly the fault of the Restaurant. They had misplaced our booking and so squeezed our little party in far too closely to the neighbouring party. All went well until I made a rather too expansive gesture with my left hand hitting a wine glass. If only it had simply toppled over. Alas the glass leapt off the table and cascaded over a young Swedish businessman sitting approximately opposite to me but to my left. The expensive red wine neatly poured down his suit jacket and trousers - his one smart business suit for his crucial business appointment the following morning. He was kind and quite charming which of course only deepened my humiliation. The waiters I suspect loved every minute. I was saved by Gosia, my cousin's wife. I should explain that Gosia is one of those young women upon whom the future of Poland depends. She is an intelligent, able, smart and hardworking businesswoman with a real ability to sum up people and situations and to get things moving. There are lots like her and they are brilliant. She seized control. Within moments she had (a) charmed him, (b) identified which Hotel he was staying at, (c) arranged for their dry-cleaning service to repair the damage overnight and (d) arranged for me to pay the bill. When you make a complete, total, utter fool of yourself it is good to have friends, better still to have family, best of all to have Gosia on hand!

For years we have foolishly avoided eating at the Hotel Bristol. This is in part down to our Polish relatives and friends and partly down to our own stupidity. We have always known that the Hotel Bristol has a brilliant but supposedly expensive restaurant. Our Polish friends denounce it for two reasons. Firstly, they describe the Hotel as the 'hall of the dead' implying that its grandeur is relatively soulless. I tend to agree with that view. Secondly, they see it as horribly expensive. Here we fall into the 'Polish price trap'. If you are in Poland for more than a day or two you fall easily into accepting the Polish view of prices. You begin to think that the article which you are thinking of purchasing is expensive because it is more costly than the items next to it. You forget that the price is still only a fraction of what you would pay for a similar item at home in the U.K. even if you could find it to buy in the

first place! We have learnt a simple lesson. If you see it in Poland and you really want it then just buy it - either it won't be available in U.K. or the U.K. price will be much higher and it may not be here next time you come to Poland. Bite on the bullet and buy it when you see it. Meanwhile we have our personal grudge against the Hotel Bristol. It is said to be Margaret Thatcher's favourite hotel. We are Liberals. We hate Margaret Thatcher. Oh boy, do we hate Margaret Thatcher.

Fran has been weakening for some time. She wants to try Sunday brunch at the Bristol. As usual I take a firm and principled stand. There is absolutely no way in which I am going to the Hotel Bristol. I have made my mind and so that is the end of it!

We arrive at the Hotel Bristol just before the start of Sunday brunch. We sit waiting for a few moments in a cavernous intimidating bar. I knew that this was a mistake. I warned her. I am not to blame. As 12.30pm precisely we are ushered into the beautiful courtyard at the centre of the building. It is carefully landscaped and planted on different levels. We are escorted to our table. We are each faced by two glasses. One is for chilled bottled water. The other is for good quality chilled white sparkling wine. As we sip our water and our wine our glasses will be repeatedly replenished. Eventually we will become so used to this marvel that we will barely notice it happening. By the time we leave we will have consumed at least two bottles of sparkling white wine each and for the first time in my life I will have eventually refused any more free drinks in a bar or restaurant.

As we sip, the musicians arrive. Today we are to enjoy a classical piano and flute recital. They are good - very, very good.

Fran has spotted caviar. This is not my scene but she is off and returns with a plate of red and black caviar served with grated hardboiled egg white, egg yolk and lemon. She is happy - very, very happy. Meanwhile my wine glass has refilled itself.

As this is brunch, cereals, croissants, fruit salad and fruit juice are available. We ignore them. We head straight for the cold buffet proper. There is an enormous range of marvellous cold Polish meats, pates, cooked hams and sliced rare roast beef. Nearby there is smoked and fresh salmon and trout, prawns, langoustine, crab claws, herring, lightly smoked mackerel, and also oysters. There are green salads, Russian salads, shrimp and rice salads, grated carrot salads, tomato salads and at least half a dozen beautiful Polish breads. Somehow, they find time to top up our glasses.

Once that hurdle is surmounted at leisure then there is the main course. Again, it is basically a buffet. The chef is there to help with

slices of exquisite fillet of beef. You can help yourself to turkey breasts in Provencal sauce and diced chicken with Polish potato dumplings. There is sauerkraut with veal, fresh salmon in dill with a wine and cream sauce and shrimp risotto. There are baby carrots, mange tout, baby sweet corns, sliced courgettes and broccoli spears. Meanwhile my wine glass has been mysteriously refilled.

Then you can help yourself to summer pudding, crème brulee, cheesecakes, tiramisu, fresh fruit salads, apple tart, various pavlovas, raspberry bavarois, roulades and fresh fruit and yes, I would like just a little more wine. This is all followed by an excellent cheese table, grapes and biscuits. There is a choice of coffees to follow. My wine glass is being refilled.

This marvellous - eat as much as you want and drink as much as you want - meal has come to the princely and predetermined sum of £25 per head. It is excellent value for money. It is one of the best meals that I have ever eaten in my life. I am glad that I thought of the idea in the first place!

Twinkle Inna Polish Stylee

Polish folk music has a dodgy reputation in the west. Its authenticity is definitely suspect. The reasons are both historic and unfortunate.

When Poland was hacked to pieces by the partitioning empires at the end of the 18th Century and subsequently divided throughout the 19th Century almost every aspect of Polish culture was suppressed. Folk music was largely ignored. It was too inconsequential to concern mighty Empires. The result was that folk music rose in status for Poles becoming not only the property of rural village communities but also the only easily accessible inspiration of classical composers seeking distinctively Polish nationalistic roots and expression.

Chopin found inspiration in Polish folk music. A series of ten French releases on Opus marking the 150th anniversary of his death includes not only a CD of the folk music which influenced Chopin but also a through the looking glass response of a Polish Folk Band playing interpretations of Chopin's music, so rediscovering and re-emphasising the strength of Chopin's reliance on Polish folk music. Other Polish composers followed along the same path. Even today Polish folk music is a favoured source of inspiration for Polish classical composers. By the end of the 19th Century Polish folk music had found a new place within the framework of an emerging socialist philosophy seeking roots in the imagined purity of traditional Polish rural peasant culture.

Later under the interwar Second Republic, folk music continued as an important inspiration in the classical compositions of Karol Szymanowski, which continues through from the earlier part of the century. Folk music is not suppressed by the Second Republic nor is it enormously encouraged by the state, rather it is simply seen as an ongoing aspect of everyday life in rural areas.

After the Second World War the new communist regime understood the need to control folk music and folk culture so that it could never again be a vehicle or code for political or cultural opposition to the state. The result was the great state dance companies Mazowsze and Sląsk that present a carefully choreographed form of folk dance which is highly rehearsed and enormously spectacular. These companies are greatly loved and are quite spectacular. It is perhaps now sensible to regard them as a distinctive art form in their own right which are based upon a reinterpretation of a folk tradition but which are really part of it. The problem lies in the fact that they are highly stylised and staged. In Poland the image of these companies gradually eclipsed more raw and authentic forms of Polish folk music and culture as the stereotypical image of Polish folklore. In the West, particularly in the

UK, they were viewed when they visited simply as colourful and entertaining foreign exotica. The folk music revival of the early 1960s meant that serious followers of folk music in Britain increasingly demanded 'authenticity'. It was not unknown to see signs in British Folk Clubs that said 'American songs are only to be sung in this club by American singers'. Later on in the 1980s and 1990s came the growing, and far more extensive, interest in 'roots' or 'world' music. Now 'authenticity' is seen as everything. In this atmosphere the great Polish Folk Dance troupes are condemned as 'stylised', 'inauthentic' and 'contrived'. The great unknowing British public still enjoy them, of course, but for serious British folk / world / roots fans they have committed the ultimate crime of 'prettification'. As a result, Polish folk music has been regarded in the West with little more than contempt and derision. Respected critics who may not have ever even heard a note of real Polish folk music write it off as insignificant when compared to the folk music of Hungary or Bulgaria. I simplify the argument to make the point but I stand by the core of the argument.

After 1989 Polish youngsters turned with enthusiasm to the western rock music now flooding the market in the form of illegal 'bootleg' cassettes and CDs. Indeed, it was estimated at that time that maybe 95% of tapes and CDs sold in Poland were illegal copies. The main form of local music for Polish youth at that time was a mindless dance hybrid known as 'Disco-Polo' which at one point looked about to escape from Poland into the wider world but, mercifully for world sanity and civilisation, ultimately failed to do so.

The Trebunie-Tutki family meanwhile had played traditional highland music in the Tatra highlands for generations. They had already released a couple of tapes of their traditional music, which had become firm favourites in the local region and often also fell into the hands of lucky tourists. They performed in various numbers and combinations. Subsequently they have produced some superb recordings of traditional Polish Highland music. Look out for 'Music of the Tatra Mountains' (Nimbus), where they play the music for a highland wedding in an informal setting, and 'Zagrajcie Dudzicki' and 'Baciarujciez Chłopcy' on Pomaton. At some point at the beginning of the 1990s the 'Twinkle Brothers' - Rastafarians Norman Grant and Dub Judah - arrived in the Tatras and discovered the Trebunie-Tutki family. It must have been a strange meeting - these Jamaican Rastafarian Reggae stars and a Polish highland family band from the Tatra Mountains. The outcome was an album involving Grant, Judah and Władysław, Anna and Krzystof Trebunia. This was to be the world's very first Jamaican Reggae / Polish highland music crossover album, entitled 'Higher Heights - Twinkle Inna Polish Stylee'. The world had

not been expecting it, the world did not know it needed it, but, to its surprise, the world discovered that it rather liked it. It became a word of mouth hit across large parts of Europe. Both traditions have an 'outlaw' culture and they came together in a series of songs in English and Polish telling the story of highland bandits to an integrated highland and reggae beat. In Poland it was a huge hit. Other epics followed including 'Come back Twinkle 2 Trebunia Family' and 'Trebunie-Tutki w Sherwood' pulling in Mega dub master Adrian Sherwood. Other cross- over experiments with Kinior Future Sound have resulted in 'Etno Techno' and the gloriously titled 'Goral-Ska Apo-Calypso'. Today Trebunie-Tutki are a national phenomenon frequently on Polish television and still happily playing both traditional and crossover music.

Other young Polish bands have taken up the challenge creating all sorts of hybrids pulling together various folk, rock and other influences from as far afield as Ukraine, North Africa and India to produce a whole new contemporary folk-music-based scene.

Meanwhile vital new resources for any young bands trying to research songs, traditions and material from the Polish folk music tradition have opened up with the absolutely tremendous Polish Radio Folk Collection: Sources of Polish Folk Music. So far over 20 CDs have appeared each one setting out to a completely comprehensive representation of the different styles of truly authentic folk music from that particular region drawn from the archives of Polish Radio recordings over the years. Each one is beautifully packaged with a detailed booklet in both English and Polish introducing the region and its particular musical styles and then presenting detailed information on the performers and their songs or tunes. Containing 30 to 50 tracks depending upon the nature of the music of the region most of them run to well over 70 minutes. Those that I have managed to obtain so far cover Mazowsze, Podhale, Lubelskie, Małopolska Północna, Wielkopolska, Kurpie Puszcza, Beskidy, Krakowskie Tarnowskie, Suwalskie Podlasie, Rzeszowskie Pogrze, Sieradzkie, Sląsk, Mniejszości, Kresy i and Polacy w Brazylii i Argentynie, Romowie. These are now an essential source for any young Polish musicians researching songs and material.

The revival of interest in Jewish Klezmer music has produced first rate bands like Kroke (the Jewish word for Kraków) with albums such as 'The Sounds of the Vanishing World', 'Eden', Live At The Pit' and 'Trio'. There is now a first-rate annual Jewish music festival in Kraków.

Orkiestra Sw. Mikołaja (St. Nicholas' Orchestra) explores the

musical legacy of the lost peoples of the eastern borderlands. Kapela ze wsi Warszawa (The Band from the Village of Warsaw) produce a marvellous outpouring of sounds bringing the music of earlier centuries alive in the modern world. Jak Wolność To Wolność (If Freedom then what Freedom) are vaguely in the same sort of league as the Pogues or the Oyster Band.

The marvellous 'A Musical Journey To Poland' (Welt Wunder Records) compilation includes tracks by Kroke, The Saint Nicholas Orkiestra, Grzegorz z Ciechowa, Trebunie Tutki w Sherwood, Berklejdy, Dziani, Kapela ze wsi Warszawa, Sławek Wierzcholski, Jak Wolność To Wolność, Chudoba, Ojdana, Maria Krupowieś and Trebunie Tutki. 'Pofolkuj Sobie!' (Polskie Radio SA) has tracks by Golec uOrkiestra, Kapela, The St. Nicholas Orkiestra, Krzysztof Trebunia-Tutka i Galago, Kayah I Bregovic, Twinkle Brothers and Trebunie Tutki, De Press, Muzykanci, Kapela ze wsi Warszawa, Berklejdy, Pawel Kukiz i Max Klezmer Band, Przykładek Starej Piesni, Kinior w Classic Polo, Varsovia Manta, Rawianie i Sqsiedzi and Trebunie Tutki.

Writing in the notes for the former, producer and musician Piotr Pucylo is clearly irritated by the way in which Polish music was abused by the communists and subsequently dismissed in the West. He writes:-

"The idea that artists from Poland can make an exciting contribution to the swimming pool of world music is quite new and only appreciated by a small group of enthusiasts. This may be the result of attempts by the previous socialist regime's attempts to reduce a vigorous folk music to the level of a postcard cliché aimed at tourists. Fortunately, these enthusiasts do exist – overcoming obstacles and limitations of music markets, they are addicted to world music and it is thanks to them that in Poland there will always be a variety of interesting folk-related projects.

Initial experiments with Polish traditional music (apart from the works of such composers like Chopin or Szymanowski) appeared in the 60s and 70s. These projects had a rather ephemeral character, however, and it was not until the mid-80s, when Andean and Celtic music became very popular, that interest in folk traditions (not necessarily Polish) became more conscious. Many young bands started playing music from Bolivia, Peru or Scotland and Ireland, temporarily forgetting about their own roots. The experience was a useful one however as, through it, musicians began to recognise their own heritage. Most of them are now creating innovative new music based on Slavic or Polish traditions. Poland has always been a country subject to influences from all parts of Europe and due to this admixture, the Polish folk tradition is very diverse. Nonetheless, and significantly it has never lost the cultural core so carefully cultivated by our

ancestors. Polish music has always been easy to recognise, which given such a variety of influences, is an unusual phenomenon.

Equally characteristic and interesting are such rediscovered traditional instruments as the suka from Bilgora, the playing technique of which resembles the Indian sarangi. Apart from strictly Polish music, the music of minorities inhabiting the south-east of Poland (Lemkos, Boykos, Hutsuls) is becoming more and more popular among young musicians like Chudoba. Although small, the contemporary Polish folk market is very diverse- Kapela ze wsi Warszawa and the Saint Nicholas Orchestra, by way of example, are two such projects that attempt to faithfully reproduce old traditions with adding a new flavour to it. In the music of Ojdana, one can hear the enriching of Polish music with elements, often quite controversial projects for which folk music is just a starting point, such as Grzegorzz Ciechowa's incorporation of elements of pop or techno. Klezmer music, as played by such bands as Kroke, also has a significant place in the music market. Perhaps the best known Polish folk music is that of the highlanders, for whom musical traditions are still vivid and strong. Passed on from generation to generation, the best example of highlanders' music comes from the Trebunia-Tutki family.

All these attempts to recreate, cultivate and develop Polish folk music influence each other and create the new picture of this musical form."

In recent years folk music crossed with elements of rock has broken into the Polish charts. Fiddles mix with guitars on hit records. Kapela have an easy on the ear mix of highland music and simple rock. Brathanki stir up a far more exotic brew of rock, various folk, border and gypsy influences. Best of all however are Golec uOrkiestra fronted by pony tailed twins Pawel and Łukasz Golec who add trumpet and trombone to traditional highlander instruments to deliver a riotous feast of music with sometimes whacky lyrics which delight Poles of all ages. Best of all is 'Ściernisco' where they sing of standing in their field of stubble planning to build a new San Francisco. They have already worked out the best site for the bank.

Too Much to Remember

The English do not value statues and monuments. They have always been there. They take them for granted. War memorials are noticed briefly on Remembrance Day but otherwise decay quietly. If statues are noticed at all it is as the occasional victims of pranks when they are painted green, daubed with graffiti, adorned with bras, damaged, or found with a pair of underpants on the head of the statue of some Victorian worthy.

The Polish experience is very different. Deprived of their monuments under partition, Nazi occupation and communist oppression there is now a rush to make up the national monument deficit.

This is part of a very long tradition. When the Tsarist regime reluctantly allowed the erection of a statue of Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz in Warsaw early in the twentieth century, they fearfully allowed no demonstration of national feeling at the unveiling by the novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz. He abandoned his speech and conducted the ceremony in silence. The crowd stood there and sobbed.

During World War II the Germans dismantled or destroyed statues and memorials. When Poles discovered where the dismantled statue of eighteenth-century insurgent Jan Kilinski was hidden, the building was daubed with the words ‘People of Warsaw - I Jan Kilinski am in here’.

Then of course there have been the negative images imposed by invaders. The Orthodox Cathedral imposed by the Tsarist regime was demolished in the early days of the Second Republic. Stalin’s Palace of Culture, dressed up a gift (but forcibly paid for by the Poles), was intended to remind the Poles who was boss. Neatly, the Poles have transformed it into the biggest clock tower in the world to mark the new millennium. The old communist party headquarters was, for a time, gleefully transformed into the stock exchange. In small Polish towns old Russian tanks rot on concrete plinths and socialist realist monuments decay peacefully, daubed with graffiti. On the Praga side of the Vistula in Warsaw the ‘four sleepers’ unintentionally reminds Poles not of the Soviet ‘liberation’ of Warsaw but rather of the Soviet failure to come to the assistance of the Warsaw Uprising.

Other memorials to communist ‘heroes’ have long since been demolished.

In the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century monuments and statues have blossomed all over the place as Poland restores and updates its pantheon of heroes and monuments.

In Warsaw there are two new statues of Józef Piłsudski. The one by the Belvedere I find less than memorable. The Piłsudski looking out over Piłsudski Square towards the tomb of the Unknown Soldier is, however, magnificent. It is strictly naturalistic if somewhat larger than life. The magic is that you recognise him as you see him in all the old films and photographs. He stands on a large plinth. He wears the familiar greatcoat and cap. He stands weight characteristically slightly forward on one foot, baton in hand, head tilted forward looking down at the ground as he always did when listening or thinking intently. It is a completely honest and realistic statue which captures the restless vigour, intelligence, power, and sheer presence and self-confidence of the man. The statue of Cardinal Wyszynski is excellent for similar reasons. The statue simply looks like him as he sits deep in thought.

The Monte Cassino monument in the Krasinski Park is a strange white mixture of Nike and mountainside bearing carved regimental emblems and relics of battle. I am not yet sure whether I like it or not.

The American Poles have donated a huge monument to General Haller's Blue Army, with its Polish American volunteers at the end of World War I. The huge plinth carries a massive horsemen and infantry, predictably blue, riding out of the waves to liberate the fatherland. The monument looks somewhat out of place stranded on an island too close to aging Warsaw blocks of flats. When I last saw it the surrounding site had a generally unfinished feel to it that did not help.

To my mind the 'monument to those who died in the east' - those deported to Siberia in the early stages of World War II - is truly magnificent. Imagine a long low ramp of railway track running up to a low plateau. Perched at the top on the track is an open railway truck. The 'sleepers' of the railway track bear the names of towns to which Poles were deported. The truck' is full of vertical crosses, with the odd one made from an inverted rifle with a soldier's cap attached. A few are Jewish tombstones or Muslim memorials. It is deeply moving and symbolic and precisely and exactly appropriate. It is particularly moving when you see old men or women peering at the names on the 'sleepers' and suddenly pointing one particular one out to a grandchild or to a small great grandchild.

Equally affecting is one of the older monuments - the statue of the small insurgent just outside the Old Town, which commemorates those children who fought and died in the Warsaw Uprising. It depicts a young girl in oversized boots and oversized helmet, wearing a Home Army arm-band, and clutching a gun across her chest. The impact should be grossly over-sentimental. In fact, it is deeply moving. There are always fresh flowers left by this little statue.

In sharp contrast is the huge monument, not too far away, of Home Army soldiers emerging, guns in hand, from the sewers. This far-too-late-in-the-day communist period recognition of the Uprising is controversial and not wholly liked. It is too harsh and cold and the figures look pressed down by the weight of concrete beams. Nevertheless, the monument is universally treated with respect and the flowers left by visitors add a touch of warmth and humanity to an otherwise grim monument.

Poles have not always been so taken with monuments. After the siege of Vienna in 1683 an Italian sculptor decided to immortalise the Polish saviour of Vienna King Jan III Sobieski in stone. So sure was he of making a sale that he rushed ahead with the work and it was only when he had it completed that he wrote to Sobieski, praising his merits and urging him to purchase the statue, which was larger than life and depicted Sobieski on horseback riding victoriously over a Turk. The king however neatly declined replying that as the victory belonged to God a celebratory statue of himself would not be appropriate. Shortly thereafter the English city of York was looking for a suitable statue of St. George and the Dragon to grace one of its public spaces. They were surprised and delighted to receive an unexpected approach from an Italian sculptor who just happened to have a just such a statue of St. George riding down the Dragon to hand and at a very reasonable price. Alas, the perils of purchasing a work of art which you have never seen. They were to be even more surprised but rather less delighted when they eventually took delivery of a rather strange statue of a somewhat unusual depiction of St. George on horseback riding down a Turk with no dragon in sight. I would love to know what became of that masterpiece.

In Warsaw too there is a little statue of Sobieski on horseback, in peculiarly unlikely classical dress, known as the ‘white king’. It sits on a small bridge by the Łazienki Park. It was here in November 1830 that young Polish cadets met in order to launch the ‘November Uprising’. It always strikes me as a peculiarly eerie and evocative place. One almost expects to suddenly see an eager young Polish cadet of 1830 clutching his rifle.

In England too there are unexpected Polish ‘monuments’. Many times, I have taken young Polish visitors to Coventry Cathedral - an amazing structure arising out of the ashes of the bombing of World War II. I don’t know if it is still there but there always used to be a brief film show for visitors explaining the origins of the cathedral. As you sat there in the pitch black you saw film taken from inside the cockpit of a bomber in action over a large city. The crew of the bomber are talking loudly in a foreign language and thoroughly enjoying

themselves - laughing and joking. The English audience sit there in silent horror at what they assume to be the antics of the wicked Germans bombing Coventry. To the horror of the English audience my Polish friends roll around laughing. They understand the jokes. They also understand the reality long before it is revealed to make a rather heavy-handed moral point to the English audience. This is of course a Polish bomber crew over a German city.

There are a few Polish statues in the U.K.

General Sikorski now stands larger than life on a plinth just along from the Polish Embassy in London's Portland Place and most of us would say about time too.

There is a superb and recently restored memorial to the Polish Air Force of World War II at Northolt which is well worth a visit.

More commonly there are graves. Many of them in London. Perhaps the oldest is White Eagle Hill in Highgate Cemetery where Karl Marx is not the only guest. An obelisk inscription is "In memory of the Polish exile Ludwig Oborski, Colonel in the Polish Army of 1831, Knight of the Military Order 'Virtuti Militari', born 1787 in the Kingdom of Poland. Died in London 25th October 1873".

Located on the edge of Albrighton in Shropshire, St Cuthbert's Church of England Church at Donnington is everyone's idea of a beautiful and traditional English Church. The superbly maintained church yard is a gentle and peaceful final resting place for a number of Air Force personnel previously based at RAF Cosford including four Polish airmen:-

PTOR J.A. Fijalkowski, 61 OTU, Died 28th April 1945, aged 27;
KPL Z. Kawczyński, 61 OTU, Died 21st February 1945, aged 23;
PCHOR P. Lucyna, I FPC, Died 2nd October 1941, aged 21; and
PLP E. Orłowski, II FTE, Died 24th January 1942, aged 34.

It is the Polish tradition to light candles on graves on All Saint's Day. In the U.K. the Polish community do this on the closest Sunday. As Polish Honorary Consul for the West Midlands I have 'adopted' these four graves and try to make sure that I am there to place the candles in their memory. I stand by their graves and wonder who they were, what they were like and the circumstances that brought them to this sad end. I would love to know if there are still family in Poland who grieve, remember, or just speculate about a distant long lost relative.

The preferred English adjective to describe a perfect graveyard or cemetery is the word 'peaceful' which in this context actually implies

picturesque, neat, well-tended, quiet and without living intruders. Polish cemeteries are equally picturesque but they are places that the living visit regularly and where you expect to see other people.

The first difference that strikes a British visitor arriving at a large urban cemetery for the first time is the well-established encampment of obviously well patronised stalls outside the gates selling real and artificial flowers and wreaths and the distinctive red glass jars of candle wax with tin lids designed to let in the air needed for the candle to burn, while also withstanding rain and wind. If the stalls also sell little bags of nuts, then it is advisable to purchase some to carry during your visit. The sale of nuts means the presence of red squirrels. It is quite endearing the first time you receive a tap on the ankle and look down to see a red squirrel, who has just retreated to a few feet away, looking up at and holding up its empty front paws in supplication for a nut. If you fail to oblige then, as you walk away, you will receive a much sharper tap on the ankle and this time the look will be one of downright bad temper. Walk away again without first proffering the demanded nut and you are likely to find yourself shortly thereafter tending a not so endearing little scratch on your ankle.

The second difference to strike a British visitor will be the amazing profusion of flowers and wreaths that decorate virtually every grave and the large number of Polish visitors to the cemetery quietly going about their business. Graves are visited regularly and are properly maintained and cleaned. Look carefully and tucked away out of sight behind many gravestones will be a battered dustpan and brush. If you are observant you will spot, tucked away, heaps of leaves and twigs, which have been swept from graves and are now awaiting final removal. Scattered around the cemetery, often at the junction of footpaths, will be standpipes where you can wash out and refill vases and jars used to hold flowers. Not only do you tend your own family grave but, if it is needed, you will clean the neighbouring grave and replenish the water for its flowers in the sure knowledge that others do exactly the same for you when you are not around. This all gives Polish cemeteries a comfortable communal and pleasantly ‘lived in’ feeling. There is an extra poignancy in Polish cemeteries too in the little oval plaques onto which have been printed and sealed sepia photographs of the deceased for display on some tombstones. These make you feel closer to the dead as you wander around a Polish cemetery in that you are suddenly aware of what they looked like in life but the fact that the photographs often show the person when young, in rather contrived and very formal pose, I also find for inexplicable reason slightly unnerving.

November 1st is All Saint’s Day in the Catholic calendar and on that

day most Poles who can, will be anxious to visit family graves. Preparations start well in advance in the larger cities. In the huge Warsaw cemeteries vehicle access for the disabled has to be stopped over a week in advance because of the huge number of visitors anxious to maintain and clean graves in readiness for All Saint's Day. Indeed, some days beforehand the parking of cars in surrounding streets is banned to prevent the otherwise inevitable total congestion of traffic and access into the area is only possible by walking or by bus or tram. The stalls almost disappear under an ocean of flowers, wreaths and candles, which are awaiting sale. On the day whole families take flowers and candles and lay them on the family graves. You can see some people struggling with enormous plastic bags of candles as they will be placed not only on the graves of family but also on the graves of friends and even on some graves for no other reason than that nobody has yet placed a candle there and on this day no-one should be forgotten. At the appointed time priests will process through the cemetery to the singing of hymns and the saying of prayers to bless the graves and the departed therein. In the U.K. for Polish émigré communities this will often take place, at an agreed time, on the afternoon of the nearest Sunday to All Saint's Day. It is important to be there with others. It is beautiful to see an otherwise desolate English cemetery suddenly come alive in the late afternoon November gloom with the twinkling lights of hundreds of candles on Polish and perhaps also Italian graves. When I light the four candles for those four your Polish airmen who lie in foreign graves at Donnington I am very aware that, as they and I play our appointed roles in this little ceremony, we are united in an act of remembrance with all Poles - living and dead - down the ages.

Nowhere on earth can be as sad as Auschwitz, which is known to the Poles as Oświęcim. Altogether it is estimated that between 900,000 and 1.5 million people, the vast majority Jewish, were murdered there in the gas chambers. Today it is a UNESCO World Heritage site and has become the ultimate memorial to human suffering and misery and also the ultimate reminder and warning about the evil which man can inflict on his fellow man. As you see the railway tracks that brought so many people to their doom and walk through those gates with their cynical lie 'Arbeit macht frei' ('Work makes you free') it is impossible to know how to feel or to react. One finds oneself as if in a dream watching oneself from outside of your own body trying to check if you are behaving in exactly the same way as everyone else. Am I walking at the same pace as everyone else? To walk just a fraction too fast would be disrespectful and I would really like to break into a run to get out of here. Do I look as dreadfully sad as everyone else? I feel as if my face is fixed in a stupid empty meaningless smirk. Do I look as if I am

thinking serious and profound thoughts like everyone else? In reality I cannot think, cannot imagine. It is all too huge for me. How can I understand? How can I come to terms with this? Like a tiny moth circling around a huge flame, I cannot understand why or what I am doing. I can only feel the burning lure of the flame.

It is all too much - too big- starting with the short film they show you when you arrive which brings you face to face with flickering moving images of the victims - the dead and almost dead - who were found when the camp was liberated at the end of the war. You then wander round the surviving buildings and see vast pitiful piles of suitcases, mountains of shoes and glasses, vast piles of human hair ready to stuff pillows, and buckets and buckets of gold teeth wrenched from the mouths of the dead and awaiting transit to the war hoard of the Reich. There are huge piles of artificial limbs removed from the dead and intended for re-use. What proportion of the population had gold teeth, glasses or artificial limbs? What does that tell us about the overall numbers slaughtered to gather in such a harvest? The dead stare back at you from the photos on the walls of the remaining blocks. You stare at the wall of death where so many were summarily and brutally massacred. You stare into the gas chambers, which are just empty spaces like any other empty spaces. You notice the small holes in the bottom of the hollow rectangular metal columns down which the contents of cans of Zyclon B were poured from above out there on the roof. You peer at the scratches in the concrete of the ceiling where those trying hardest to hang on to life clawed at the ceiling having fought their way to the top of the pile of corpses beneath to seek the last vestiges of healthy air. You stare into the stone-cold ovens devoid now of burning flesh. You stare into the depths of a vast shallow lake bottomed in a thick layer of fine white sand which you realise is not fine white sand but the ashes of hundreds of thousands of your fellow human beings. It is impossible to think, to feel or to react. It is too huge. All the sorrow of the world is gathered here in one dismal little place.

You enter a block and go down some tiny narrow stairs. There is a narrow ill-lit corridor. On either side of you are the little wooden doors to tiny airless cells. You walk along silent and increasingly fearful. You turn into a short connecting passageway to your left which leads into another corridor parallel and identical to the one you first entered and which you have now left in reality just a few steps, but in your imagination far, far, behind. You turn to the right. You know that you are only in an underground basement, and that the sunlight and the real world is still outside, but you feel as if you are sinking to the centre of the earth, that you will never see daylight again and that any

second the walls will close in to crush you. Just ahead of you on the left a cell door stands open. You do not want to look inside but you feel compelled and drawn to do so. You look in. It is so very, very small - so tiny. There is a small spray of flowers on the floor. Here in this then hideously overcrowded little cell, in this death block, St. Maksymilian Kolbe died after volunteering his life for that of a fellow prisoner. Suddenly you are no longer confronting unfathomable cruelty and immeasurable suffering. Suddenly you are face to face with the fate of one man and his goodness, humanity and self-sacrifice in the face of the most terrible horrors and certain death. For a second you are no longer at the gates of Hell but rather you are as near to Heaven as you will get on this earth.

Auschwitz eventually leaves you tired and drained of emotion. When you leave you feel the need to wash - to get rid of the dust and an imaginary stench. It is best to move on fast - to have somewhere else to go and something else to do. Certainly, do not sit and ponder too much as then a gnawing sadness will only seep into your bones. Get moving. Do something in the bright warm light of day. Don’t worry. Once you have been to Auschwitz - even if only once and even if only for a few brief fleeting hours - you will never, ever forget.

“Achy, Breaky…”

Mragowo is a pleasant enough little town situated on the main - a rather optimistic description of a narrow twisting and turning - road that runs across northern Poland from Olsztyn to Augustów. The little town has a very German feel to its architecture, which is hardly surprising as for a substantial period this was Sensburg in East Prussia. At the heart of the town is a small square, which is only a short walk to Lake Czos, the fairly modest but rather picturesque lake at whose side the town emerged.

Mragowo hosts the annual Country ‘Piknik’ at the end of July. At first sight the idea of indigenous country music following with its own Polish country music stars is to say the least peculiar. Country is a singularly and specifically American form, which rarely translates well into other countries. Even country music performed by English performers - who at least supposedly share the same language - simply does not seem right. Try as they may it comes across as stilted and lacklustre. Quite why this should be I am never totally certain. I suspect it has much to do with the distinctive southern drawl that seems to be a perquisite for what is after all essentially southern working-class music. If that accent is essential for lyrics about cheatin’ love, betrayal and broken hearts it is all the more essential when it comes to the vast repertoire about truckin’, honky tonks and particularly those songs which are laden with the name of American towns and cities. It is amazing how songs about ‘The Streets of Baltimore’, ‘Bakersfield Bound’ or ‘Montgomery in the Rain’ can sound romantic and exciting in a way in which a song about ‘The Streets of Brentford’, ‘Bradford Bound’ or ‘Market Harborough in the Rain’ simply cannot.

One of the reasons for the original modest popularity of country music in Poland is its unusual political resonance to Poles. Mainstream country music has had a generally safe and conservative resonance in the west with the exception at various times of ‘country rock’, ‘outlaw country’ and now ‘alternative country’. In Poland in the 1980s American country music had a more dangerous and radical reputation. However maudlin and reactionary the lyrics, it was dangerous and dissident simply because it was American. When, very occasionally, the communist regime allowed American country artists in Poland, as a sort of safety valve for letting off steam, the very decision to attend such a concert said something about where you stood and implied that you looked west rather than east.

The Country Piknik at Mragowa has now been running for some twenty years. We are not stupid. We are western. We are soft. We are

too old. We absolutely refuse to live on the campsite. My cousin is younger, Polish and tougher. For him the experience of getting under canvas at one of the cheap and cheerful lakeside campsites is an essential part of the experience. He is prepared to queue for showers and toilets in the morning and to sleep in a little canvas village occupied by some of the world's heaviest drinkers. On at least one occasion he was sufficiently carried away by the charm of the whole experience to drink the lake water. Even he admitted that was a mistake not only for him but also for all his fellow campers for whom the queue outside the toilet became longer and more time consuming than ever.

One of my favourite points in the proceedings is the moment at which he comes to ask if he can use our beautiful sparkling en suite hotel toilet and shower. At that moment I know that our decision was correct. We, you see, have a comfortable room at the Orbis Hotel Mragowia. It is not easy to get into the Hotel Mragowia during the few days of the Country Piknik. It is the centre of operations for the festival organisers and they have booked all the rooms. Fortunately, Wojtek's friend Mieczysław is heavily involved in the whole scene and can pull the strings to get a room for the strange English relatives of his friends. Mieczysław will himself of course be down at the campsite in the next tent to Wojtek!

The Hotel Mragowia is spacious and comfortable. It is tiered up a hillside so, regardless of whatever level your room is theoretically located at, you are always going to be at ground level or just one level above. As far as I can recall from memory not only will you have a spacious well-equipped room you will also always have a small but useful balcony on which to sit and sip your drinks. If you are lucky a hotel cat may drop in to see you.

Elsewhere we have already extolled the outstanding virtues of the Hotel breakfasts. They are extraordinary and generally make any further concern about eating largely redundant. Further eating is a happy indulgence rather than a further necessity.

The Piknik takes on a timetable of its own. For us each day starts with a struggle to get up in the morning after the inevitable previous late night. Indeed, getting up for us in the morning is only possible because of the magnetic attraction of the magnificent breakfast table. After wallowing in a long slow vast Hotel Mragowia breakfast we are sufficiently resuscitated to brave a gentle stroll into town perhaps meeting the others, Wojtek and Gosia and a gang of their friends, at a predetermined point en-route if of course everybody has managed to make it to their feet. The small town is heaving with a huge influx of

people for the Piknik. In fact, there are far more people visiting the town – over 50,000 visitors - than will ever get onto the concert site. Some will sit on the hillside outside to listen while others will make their own fun. Many are Polish bikers with Harley Davidsons, leathers, the appropriate long unwashed hair and all the trimmings. Others are packed on to restored jeeps and other light military style vehicles. They are recognisable even when away from their vehicles by their distinctive camouflage fatigues. Their vehicles are covered in the stars and stripes which can be seen everywhere. We wander around the small town window shopping, chatting and spotting the serious country fans dressed up in extravagant western gear. The food in the small cafes is cheap and very good quality particularly the fish. The beer is good and chilled. The fantastic Polish ice creams are to die for. We drift from bar to bar and snack to snack. In the late afternoon we drift back to the hotel maybe for another beer before washing, changing and resting in order to be ready for the evening.

At around 7.15pm suitably washed, refreshed and equipped we emerge to wander down to the outdoor auditorium, which is actually in the grounds of the hotel. We take the steps, a busy short cut down from the hotel to the main path leading from the town to the auditorium. Here in the darkening evening are stalls selling cowboy hats, boots, shirts, t-shirts, posters and perhaps CDs. Here above all are stalls selling ice-cold beer in half litre and litre plastic containers. Here too are stalls selling all sorts of hot Polish delicacies and in particular barbecued kiełbasa. The beautiful aroma of cooked Polish sausage fills the evening air.

It takes only a few seconds to get your ticket checked and to enter the auditorium, which is cut into the hillside and runs down to the stage immediately behind which is the lake. As the night darkens this gives you an increasingly spectacular view as illuminated boats drift on the lake behind the stage. The auditorium is permanent and the seating consists of wooden slats fixed across supporting concrete blocks. You take your own cushion or blanket to sit upon. As each row and each space on the benches is numbered you have the same seat for each of the three nights of the Piknik, which means that you have exactly the same neighbour each night and therefore you get to know the people around you. During the performance people wander around selling beer, which seems to disappear as soon as it is produced. From time-to-time people wander off to buy beer returning laden to distribute it to friends. As the evening progresses, large plastic two litre coca-cola bottles are passed around. These are filled with approximately two thirds coca-cola to one third rough vodka. As the bottle passes along the row you take a big gulp and pass it on. As the night progresses the

percentage of vodka in the bottles seems to increase. The audience is of all ages, from babes in arms and little tots, through to a scattering of old people with everything else in-between. Despite the heavy drinking there is no trouble. If anyone starts to cause a nuisance, neighbours immediately pin them down and stewards are instantly summoned to remove the offender. The police drift around the edge of the event, present but generally relaxed and unneeded. Thanks to Mieczysław's influence we are in the best seats in the third or fourth row. Later in the night everyone will be dancing on the benches. Fortunately, we can avoid the overcrowded if not actually overflowing temporary toilets. Mieczysław knows where the thoroughly more desirable permanent toilets are located and drags me off by the hand, ignoring the queues, and shouting above the mayhem "make way, make way - an Honorary Consul of the Republic of Poland requires to piss!" Amazingly the queue does in fact give way - more I suspect because they know Mieczysław rather than out of any respect for the bodily needs and functions of honorary consuls of the Republic of Poland!

The stage is elaborately decorated in a form of 'cod' western style in order to convey the vague impression of a western bar. The comperes sit at a table and tend to talk too much during the evening. The three evenings are generally themed. One night may be a competition with bands from all over Europe competing for a cash award. There may be a tribute to a particular American artiste, a special anniversary appearance by a Polish band who have made it through ten, twenty or twenty-five years, or even an Irish night. Each evening is generally climaxed with an American 'star'. Usually these are the weakest links in the chain and are either 'has beens', long past any sort of sell-by date, or people nobody in the west has heard of and of whom people in the west are never going to hear. Apparently, these acts are considered essential but why I never understand. By the time they appear the Polish audience is usually far too happy and maybe a little too drunk to give them anything but the most over generous welcomes.

Interviewed on Polish Radio, to the horror of the Festival's Media Officers, I rashly admitted that I had not heard of a 'star' English band that would be playing that night. The truth is that for all I know they may be popular somewhere but nobody I have met in England has ever heard of them!

Far more interesting are the central European bands. I have seen the most tremendous country rock band from St. Petersburg ("Actually we are from Ukraine but it sounds better if we say we are from St. Petersburg") deliver a searing version of 'Knockin' on Heaven's Door' that well outclasses anything Dylan could do with it. And how is it that the Czech Republic produces the very finest and tightest bluegrass

bands in the world?

The ‘big three’ of Polish country music are widely reckoned to be Pawel Baczkowski who is rather good and close to rockabilly, Tomasz Szwed who is enormously popular with Polish country fans but whose ballads fail to turn me on, and Lonstar who carries traditional mainstream country well. Everyone loves Magda Anioł who also has a fine straight pop album (‘Co To Jest?’) to her credit. For me the best Polish band is Whiskey River who play and sing with real style and conviction. The Country Piknik anthem is ‘Wszystkie drogi Prowadzą do Mragowa’ by Cezary Makiewicz. Other really solid Polish country bands include Colorado Band, Johnny Walker Band, Fair Play, Coach and Gang Marcella.

It is the last night of the Country Piknik. It is maybe 1.00am in the morning. The night is still warm. I take another swig from the passing vodka and coca-cola in which there is now very little coca-cola. The guy next to me is a veritable man mountain who completely dwarfs me. He is clearly an outdoor manual worker of some sort - he has hands like shovels. He beams and hugs me, leaps to his feet, pulls me up till I am standing on the bench. “Dance, English” he says. I have no choice. I have a Stetson perched on my head and like everyone else I am dancing on a bench to the sound of Pawel Baczkowski belting out “Achy, Breaky Heart”. In Polish the words sound for all the world like “Achy, Breaky Fart”!

Wolf's Lair

Kętrzyn, known until 1945 as Rastenburg, in the north of present-day Poland is a quiet little town known to the wider world solely because of its close proximity to Hitler's 'Wolf's Lair' which must be one of Europe's strangest tourist destinations. Here deep in the Mazurian forests is the place from which Hitler presided over his doomed Russian campaign. The core 27-acre complex included private bunkers encased in metres of thick concrete for Hitler, Goring, Himmler, and Bormann as well as quarters for other senior officers, guests and the SS plus the necessary operations room and support facility. At one time a suspended screen of vegetation, which was changed to match the passing of the seasons, carefully camouflaged this heavily defended core site. Further separate complexes of bunkers for the Army and the Luftwaffe fanned out over a forty-kilometre radius from the central site. The core site was carefully mined in case of the need to abandon it if the worst came to the worst. Indeed in 1945 the retreating Germans did indeed hurriedly attempt to destroy the complex. In the event the explosives only succeeded in partially destroying the site.

Today Wolf's Lair is a strange and peculiar contradiction. There is something somehow singularly inappropriate about the café, shop and other facilities at such a peculiarly malevolent site. Today there are the empty shells of bunkers in lesser or greater states of ruin. Some are almost intact. Others send out great twisted slithers of metal reinforcement. Huge beams and enormously thick slabs of concrete lie at odd or preposterous angles. One peers down narrow staircases which now lead nowhere down into the ground.

Guides are leading tour groups around. No English-speaking guide is available on the day we are there. We follow on behind a guide who is talking away in both German and Polish. His party seems to consist of a mixture of both nationalities.

The huge ruins are clearly marked in several languages - 'Do Not Enter'. Nevertheless, the guide invites you to "come in" and so you tread carefully between the pillars and fallen slabs examining the cold empty interiors. Here, in these strange and awful surroundings, you can begin to feel the paranoia and evil at the heart of the Third Reich. In this environment of dense overbearing forest and enormous concrete bunkers it would be impossible to retain any sense of reality or even any meaningful perception of a normal outside world. For those who worked there day by day for months at a time and who rarely if ever escaped from the oppressive atmosphere, pressures and political intrigues, it must have been a deeply debilitating environment gnawing

at sanity and at the ability to function. It is a ghastly evil and mercifully self-destructive folly.

We stop at the bunker where Hitler survived the bomb attempt on his life in the July of 1944. There is a relatively new memorial to Stauffenberg and the other conspirators who lost their lives in the aftermath of the attempt. The Guide explains what happened in German. He then repeats the story adding in Polish “when this was unveiled, I was invited to be here but I didn’t come - they were still Germans”. He tells the Germans, in German, that, “at least 5,000 people were slaughtered by the Nazis in the aftermath of the conspiracy”. He tells the Poles, in Polish, that, “at least 5,000 people - no, sorry, I mean Germans – were slaughtered by the Nazis in the aftermath of the conspiracy”. Afterwards we buy the guide a beer in the little bar on the site. He has no sympathy for Germans who come back to the old East Prussia lamenting the loss of their homes. His family were driven out of Vilna. Fifty years later his bitterness and resentment is as fresh as if it happened yesterday.

“We Happen to Have Tickets for a Concert”

Poles are great cinema, theatre and concertgoers. Certainly in the Polish émigré community there is an unnerving (unnerving at least for concert organisers) tendency to want to buy tickets ‘on the door’. English friends dutifully purchase tickets in advance. Polish friends simply want to buy the ticket on the night. Harvington Hall is an old, moated, 15th and 16th century manor house famed for its ‘priest’s holes’ and hiding places from the times when Catholic priests faced persecution and death in England. Its grounds are now the idyllic setting for an annual June musical festival. A few years ago, a large choir came over from Poznań to sing at an evening concert. The afternoon before we went over to buy tickets. “How is going?” we asked. “Just look at the number on the back of your tickets” she replied grimly. We looked and discovered that we had just purchased numbers 7 and 8. The organisers were desperate. They had they assured us sent posters and leaflets to every Polish club in the region. We assured them that Poles were like that. They would simply turn up on the night. Privately I was extremely doubtful. The following night we sit there outdoors in the early evening warmth of these historic surroundings, sipping wine and listening to magnificent Polish choral music spanning the centuries from the Middle Ages to the present day. We are of course surrounded by hundreds of Poles from all over the region who are thoroughly enjoying themselves. It is of course a complete and total sell out.

In Warsaw too we notice that for small gigs there is a laid back - don’t bother to get the tickets in advance we’ll get them on the door - attitude. There always seems to be a vast range of music of all sorts in Warsaw.

Other occasions are of course much more formal and organised.

In the October of 1998 I fly into Warsaw for a three-day conference for Polish Honorary Consuls to E.U. countries. The venue is the little palace used by the Polish Foreign Ministry, which is tucked away on ul. Foksal, a little street of Nowy Świat just by and parallel to Al. Jerozolymska. I am staying with Tadek and Basia Jarzembowski, whose flat is within walking distance from there, near to the Poniatowski Bridge. Having just flown in I am absolutely exhausted. Arriving at their flat Tadek and Basia tell me that they have tickets for a concert that evening and that they have managed to get an extra ticket for me. My heart sinks. I am exhausted. I was hoping for a quiet evening and perhaps to meeting Wojtek for a quiet beer in a bar somewhere. I explain that I am tired but Tadek and Basia are not taking ‘no’ for an answer. Knowing that it would be churlish and

ungrateful to dig my heels in I concede the point hoping that they haven't noticed my reluctance.

I phone Wojtek. "Ah, Michał how are you?" I explain that I am totally exhausted. "Do you feel well enough to meet up tonight? Why not come round to the flat for supper?" I explain that I would love to see him and the family but that, although I had at first tried to get out of it, I have very reluctantly agreed to go out with Tadek and Basia tonight. "Oh well" says Wojtek "we can always meet up tomorrow. So, are you going anywhere interesting tonight?" he asks. I explain that I have no idea where we are going but that they have obtained tickets for some sort of concert. Wojtek's voice at the other end of the line changes immediately "Concert, what concert?" he demands. I explain again that I have no idea. "Is Tadek there?" demands Wojtek. I explain that, yes, Tadek is in the next room. "Then ask him if it is THE concert?" I ask in return what he means. What is THE concert? "Never mind" says Wojtek "just ask him if it is THE concert". I stick my head round the door and, slightly embarrassed, I explain that Wojtek wants to know if it is THE concert. Tadek is not at all surprised by the question. He confirms that indeed it is of course THE concert. I retail the news to Wojtek. There is a long silence at the other end of the line. For a moment I think the line has gone dead. When I hear Wojteks voice again his tone has changed completely. I sense genuine bemusement and resignation tinged with just a grudging touch of admiration as he says "You fly into Warsaw today without even knowing that THE concert is on. YOU have a ticket for THE concert and YOU don't even have to pay for it - and you don't even have the slightest idea what THE concert is! O.K. we meet tomorrow. Tonight, I will sit at home and watch the television just in case it is possible to see you".

I bathe and change into the one good suit that I have brought to Warsaw for this trip. Tadek is resplendent in dress suit and Basia is beautifully dressed and looking absolutely radiant. They lament my failure to bring a dress suit to Warsaw but decide that I will simply have to do. Then we are off to the Grand Theatre. I have never been there. I know that it is one of the world's grandest theatres with one of the world's largest stages rebuilt, like most of Warsaw, after World War II. The absolutely huge stage is essential because several of the great Polish operas by Stanisław Moniuszko have large casts, require huge sets and feature enormous set piece dance sequences. We go by taxi and are dropped off near to the theatre. The immediate area around the magnificently illuminated façade is cut off to vehicle access by police barriers. There are police everywhere. Exquisitely dressed groups and couples are moving purposefully towards the building. It is

impossible not to notice the atmosphere of excitement and anticipation. I try to look smaller and less conspicuous. This is not an easy task for someone of my bulk but it feels as if, apart from the police, I must be the only male in Warsaw not wearing full evening dress.

We go into the building, produce tickets, and are ushered into the huge auditorium. We not only have seats - we have a box just to the right of the stage. I look round and suddenly realise that I am recognising faces. Most of the government and the leadership of the opposition are here. There are well-known actors and singers and directors. Others, whom I cannot recognise, are obviously well known to the Poles around them. Indeed, the cream of Warsaw society is present. Tadek points out some leading figures from the Polish national football team. I suddenly become aware of the weight of the programme, which we were each handed on the way in. At first glance it is an A4 sized, hard-bound book, and yes, upon opening it the pages start to turn but then I realise that the bulk of the 'book' behind the opening pages is solid. Set into the centre of the solid section is the CD of the concert we are about to watch. I am seriously impressed.

It is just before 7.00pm on the evening of the 1st October 1998 and I am sitting in seat 8 at the front of box 2 in the amphitheatre of the Teatr Wielki w Warszawie awaiting the World Premiere of Zbigniew Preisner's 'Requiem Dla Mojego Przyjaciela' ('Requiem For My Friend').

Preisner is best known as a composer of film music. He is probably best known in the west for his music to the films 'Three Colours Blue', 'Three Colours Red', and 'Three Colours White'. In the United Kingdom composers of film music are treated with at least slight disdain. They are not quite 'serious' composers. However successful, they lack a certain gravitas and status. In Poland, which boasts a galaxy of magnificent living classical composers that Britain cannot even begin to match, good composers of film music claim far greater respect. In part this is because the Polish cinema produces far more films that deserve to be taken seriously than its British counterpart. In part this is because Polish composers are more easily happy to cross backwards and forward across the line between 'serious' music and 'film' music. Actually, they barely differentiate between the two. If it is good music then it is good music. Polish composers like Wojciech Kilar throw the full armoury of their artistic skill into whatever they do.

Tonight, it is however Preisner. The friend to whom this Requiem is dedicated is the famed Polish film Director Krzysztof Kiesłowski for whose films he so often wrote. The piece opens in the form of a

traditional Requiem Mass. It is the music that was performed at Kiesłowski's funeral. The musicians and singers are dwarfed by what appear to be huge and elaborate columns or chimneys of copper belching smoke and flames. The music is absolutely breathtaking. Eventually these columns or chimneys part leaving a darkened stage onto which a single dark suited saxophonist wanders playing his part. It is an amazingly powerful transformation and transition from the deep formality of intense but controlled and formalised grieve to a suddenly intimate and personal dimension which moves us so much closer to the loss but leads us on to hope for the future.

The performance brings together the Sinfonia Varsovia conducted by Jacek Kapszyk, the Warsaw Chamber Choir conducted by Ryszard Zimak and most movingly the Boy's Choir of the Kraków Philarmonic conducted by Lidia Matynian-Halon. The soloists are tremendous - the soprano Elżbieta Towarnicka, the Counter tenor Piotr Lykowski, the superb saxophonist Jerzy Głowczeski, the marvellous pianist Leszek Możdżer, Jacek Ostaszewski on flute, and soloist Dorota Ślęzak.

The performance and the staging are truly magnificent. The evening is a complete and magnificent triumph.

Afterwards Tadek and Basia, who are quite rightly absolutely delighted with the evening, take me out for dinner. The following day members of the Senior Foreign Office staff are amazed to discover that I had a ticket for THE concert. They did not all make it themselves. My cousin had watched the reporting of THE concert on television.

I had thoroughly, completely and totally lost myself in this glorious Polish music and the glory of the presentation. I was also sad. Poland is not a rich country. Poland is clawing its way back into the daylight after long desperate decades of misery and terror. I have not heard of any Pole complaining against the expense of this one single night - and yes it was staged for one night only - nor have I heard anyone complaining of cultural elitism or some similar sin. Poles take these events seriously. They are a matter of national pride. No, the root of my sadness lay a very long, long way away across the English Channel.

My awful sadness lay in the fact that I believed that the England, which I also love with every fibre of my being, has totally lost its way and cannot any longer deliver such an event. Like most Brits I was doomed to watch on television the hopeless unveiling of London's Millennium Dome - although in my case I saw it later on French television as we escaped to Calais for millennium night.

Crib With Field Gun

In England the armed forces are curiously invisible. This is partly because, since compulsory two-year national service was abandoned decades ago and the part-time territorial army has been allowed to shrink to a tiny fraction of its former glory, we only have a very small and diminishing standing army. There is however rather more to it than that. We do not flaunt what armed forces we do have. They are on the whole kept discreetly out of sight. They do appear occasionally in the newspaper but in the context of events in Northern Island, Bosnia or, particularly at this moment, Afghanistan. They are curiously distant - somewhere out there. They don't feel like a part of us. Yes, of course it is very different for the families and close friends of soldiers, sailors and airmen but as the numbers of servicemen have declined so too has our direct knowledge of them and today most of us are far less likely to be aware of them than we were in the past. In my own hometown of Kidderminster you no longer even see military bands on Remembrance Sunday and Mayor's Sunday. They are too expensive to hire.

In Poland the army are far more visible. In part this is because Poland still has two-year compulsory national service although this will undoubtedly be phased out shortly. As a result, there are far more young men to be seen wandering around in army fatigues.

It is however the case that the army is a far more significant factor in the Polish national consciousness. The landmarks in Polish history are those of glorious military victories, heroic defeats, doomed but glorious uprisings, freedom lost and independence regained. The army and its past glories are therefore crucial to the national identity.

History is still taught in a traditionally clear and logically chronological manner in Poland so as to continue to give proper balance to political history, military history, economic history, social history, cultural history and scientific history. In England for most youngsters there sometimes appears to be only social history taught in the chronologically disconnected chunks of 'topics' such as housing, clothes, medicine or whatever. Political and military history have disappeared. If they learn anything of the Second World War it will be about rationing, the evacuation of children, the blackout, the blitz and the Battle of Britain. Most English children would not recognise Montgomery's name, are unlikely to have heard of Haig, and may have only the vaguest idea of Wellington (principally now remembered for the boot) and Waterloo or of Nelson and Trafalgar. They are even less likely to have heard of Cromwell and Marlborough is surely an American brand of cigarette. The British Empire is an embarrassment best forgotten unless in the context of 'black' history. I apologise for

diverting into this rant but having spent several decades as a history teacher watching the subject I love being dismembered I feel strongly on the matter.

Poles on the other hand are far more likely to be aware of their military history. They still warm to tales of the unexpected victory of the Polish Knights at Grunwald in the early 15th Century. They know of the ups and downs of the great struggles of the 17th Century against Sweden, Turkey and the Cossacks. They remember the doomed struggles of Kościuszko in the face of partition and the glorious campaigns of Poniatowski and the Polish Legions under Napoleon including the charge of the Polish Lancers at and through the Spanish guns at Somo-Sierra - a charge which matches the charge of the Light Brigade (who?) in bravery and outclasses it as a military action in that it achieved its objective. They remember the insurgents of the November Uprising of 1830 and of all the other uprisings of the 19th Century. The greatest pride and affection is reserved however for the Polish forces of the 20th Century. The Legions of Piłsudski and Haller's Blue Army, their struggles in the First World War, Piłsudski's triumph over the Soviets in 1920 it 'The Miracle on the Vistula', the doomed heroism of Poland's troops in 1939 and all the struggles of the Second World War are clearly remembered and clearly taught.

It is not perhaps surprising if the Polish army is central to the national identity. In the heart of Warsaw, the statue of Józef Piłsudski now looks out across the vast open space of Piłsudski Square towards the three remaining lower arches of the vast 19th century colonnade of the Saxon Palace, which once stretched across the square. The rest was destroyed in World War II. Behind this a huge fountain plays and the beautiful Saxon Gardens, open to the public since 1772, stretch away towards Marszałkowska at the heart of the city's main modern shopping zone. Beneath the central arch of the remaining piece of colonnade lies the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Here, since 1925, has lain the body of an unknown defender of Lwów in the fighting of 1918-1919, The columns surrounding the tomb carry huge bronze plates bearing the names of all the major battlefields upon which Poles have fought and died since earliest times. The two soldiers on guard are changed on the hour while a more elaborate changing of the guard involving all three armed forces takes place at noon each Sunday.

It is difficult to think of any other country where the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is so visible and prominent in the heart of a capital city. Indeed, Poland must be one of very few countries where all the foreign tourist guides include the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the list of essential sights to be seen by visitors.

It is on Piłsudski Square before the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier that the great commemorative events of the Polish calendar take place. This is the focus for the main national events marking Constitution Day on May 3rd, Soldiers' Day on August the 15th, the Feast of the Assumption, marking Piłsudski's 1920 victory over the Soviets, and November 11th which to Poles is Independence Day marking the Nation's rebirth in 1918.

The format on each occasion is very similar. Large crowds gather behind the barriers that block off a large rectangular area in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Representational units of the Navy, the Air Force and of the various units of the Polish Amy parade. There is a Polish military band sometimes in flamboyant blue, white and yellow Napoleonic uniform often playing the march of the First Brigade and finishing with the Warszawianka of the November Uprising of 1830. The President arrives and inspects the parading units. When he finally reaches the permanent long low stone plinth, where the other important guests are already standing, and takes his place behind the lectern decorated in the white and red national colours the military units are called to attention and the national colours are run up to the strains of the Polish National Anthem, 'Poland is Not Yet Lost'. The President then addresses not only the assembled gathering but also the nation via the ever-present television cameras. Veterans' representatives will be seated near to the presidential plinth and veterans' standards will also be on parade. Then a whole series of wreaths are laid by the various representatives of the Polish State and Military to the repetitive beat of military music. At the end the military units march off past the President, followed finally by the band. A popular recent initiative is for the march past to be joined by a small squadron of horse men in the uniform of the Polish cavalry. Under communist rule the cavalry was totally disbanded partly on the grounds of military redundancy in the modern age, but in reality because the cavalry had been the elite of the Polish pre-war army and was therefore seen by the communists as associated with values and aspirations that they hoped to bury and forget. The sight of the cavalry always delights the waiting crowd.

Also restored in the post-communist period has been the post of Bishop to the Army. Indeed, the Army has its own cathedral church in Warsaw, which contains an enormous number of plaques in memory of Polish military units and their leaders. Caritas is well known as the key Catholic charity in most parts of the world. Poland is unique that as well as having Diocese-based Caritas organisations it also has the Caritas of the Field Ordinate of the Polish Army. They provide the label on which releases by the Polish Army Choir – Orzeł Biały (White Eagle)

- release CDs of Polish army songs and Christmas Carols.

Despite Poland's deep-rooted nationalism and pride in its military tradition Poland remains one of most un-aggressive and un-threatening nations on earth. Maybe Poland has suffered too much from aggressors to ever want to be one itself. At Christmas near to the army cathedral is a crib. It features a small army tent. The flap is pulled open to reveal an illuminated crib with a little baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The three kings, the shepherds, the sheep and cows gather round the entrance. Behind the little tent is a semi-circle of full-scale sandbags and behind that a field gun barrel pointed skywards.

Only in Poland could this be seen as a totally proper and respectful representation of Christmas. Only in Poland could this be possible. Poles stop and look with their children pointing out the figures surrounding the crib to the little tots. This is a different world.

I love this beautiful crazy country!

6. SQUARING THE CIRCLE

So at the end of everything where exactly do all my discoveries and adventures with Poland, Poles and 'Polishness' leave me?

I have two beautiful passports - my handsome red covered British passport and my equally handsome blue covered Polish passport.

I enjoy the history, literature music and traditions of these two great nations.

I am proud to play my part for both countries - in my case as an English local Councillor and as a Polish Honorary Consul. I do what I can and I am happy with that.

I am lucky to live in the beautiful 'heart of England' and to spend my holidays exploring the wonders of Poland.

I celebrate my British style birthday (August 18th) and my Polish Name Day (September 30th) in style.

I enjoy good British beer and first-rate Polish vodka (not to mention any good wine which is going).

I enjoy English pubs and Polish bars.

I can enjoy all the events at the Polish Club in Kidderminster now so expertly run by Maria Lee, who is also Chairman of the Kidderminster Branch of the S.P.K. (Polish Ex-Combatants Association) and Danuta Marszałek.

I thoroughly enjoy Polish and English cuisine and being born in Scotland I am partial to haggis. I can also admit to loving Italian, Chinese and Indian food and to a lesser extent French and German cuisine.

I celebrate the Polish Christmas Eve Wigilia of twelve meatless dishes and the next day happily tuck into English style turkey Christmas Dinner with all the trimmings.

When the British are making a mess of things, I can claim to be Polish and when the Poles do something stupid I am certainly British.

I can celebrate the political, cultural and sporting triumphs of both countries whilst walking away from their failures. I only have to go into hiding when Poland plays England at football. Fortunately, neither are much good at cricket.

Am I Polish? I was not born there. I do not live there. I cannot speak the language.

Am I English? I was born here. I live here. I speak the language.

I love both countries, both cultures, both inheritances. I want to know as much as I can about both countries - their language, culture, society, history, and traditions. I try to work for both of them.

And, oh yes, I enjoy bigos and chips - although I have to say not on the same plate at the same time.

And so I am happy with where I have ended up and I feel sorry for anyone who has not been given the opportunities of such a marvellous dual identity. At this point I would like to say something truly profound and full of revelation and understanding for you to take away and remember with wonder and admiration. Alas, I can think of nothing more to say. I am at the end of this book - a traveller at the end of a journey - happy but too tired for further exertion.

I leave you to form your own views and to draw your own conclusions - I am happy.

I am what I am - somewhere between the boundaries of two nationalities.

My favourite Polish writer Tadeusz Konwicki has all the best words anyway and so I will finish with a quote from his New World Avenue and Vicinity (translated by Walter Arndt for Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991):-

“Never again will I use the punctuation we always called the “question mark.” Never again will I set a query between my rickety sentences. I don’t need one anymore”.

7. OVER TO YOU

The days when it was impossible to find any books in English about Poland are long since gone. So too are the days when it was impossible to purchase Polish music, videos or folk art in the United Kingdom. Indeed, the problem now is how to work out which of many companies to go to and what to buy from an ever expanding supply of items. The lists that follow are not meant to be all embracing. Far from it. These are all starting points to get you going…

Guide Books

Both the Rough Guide and the Lonely Planet guides to Poland are comprehensive in their coverage. However, the ‘Eyewitness Travel Guides – Poland’ (Dorling Kindersley) is the greatest fun. The Eyewitness Travel Guides to Warsaw and Cracow are truly magnificent.

Maps

Maps of Poland designed for every imaginable use are readily available in Poland and most major Western retailers can obtain basic travel and motoring maps for you.

If you want a straightforward single sheet map for motoring around Poland look out for the ‘ExpressMap Polska - Mapa Samochodowa’. It is laminated and folds easily for car use. They produce 1:1,250.000, 1:500,000 and 1:1,000,000 versions. They also produce an excellent 1:60,000 map of the Mazurian lakes and excellent city maps of Warsaw, Kraków, Gdańsk and Poznań. The size makes them convenient to carry and the lamination makes them easy to use in the street even if it is raining. For really serious motorists we recommend the 370 page 1:200,000 Polski Atlas Samochodowy’ published by PPWK (Polskie Przedsiębiorstwo Wydawnictw Kartograficznych).

Phrase Books

There are many available small phrase books readily available. Our favourites include:-

‘Polish – The Rough Guide Dictionary Phrasebook’

‘BBC Polish Phrase Book’

‘Eyewitness Travel Guides Polish Phrase Book’

‘Berlitz Polish Phrase Book & Dictionary’ (with or without tape)

Dictionaries

Many are available to suite all tastes and needs. For a solid basic one volume job Delta's 'Universal English-Polish & Polish-English Dictionary' compiled by Maria Szutnik is just fine.

Newspapers

The Polish language daily Newspaper in the U.K., ‘Dziennik Polski’, and its thicker Saturday counterpart, ‘Tydzień Polski’, can be ordered through WH Smith and other major stockists.

‘Warsaw Voice’ is the excellent English language weekly published in Warsaw. It can be ordered by post. I find it absolutely essential. The whole publication goes online, as it hits the streets each Thursday, at ‘www.warsawvoice.pl‘.

Learning Polish

Polish Language evening courses can be found at some local colleges although coverage is very patchy across the country.

Very useful is the two volume ‘We Learn Polish’ by Barbara Bartnicka et al, published by Wiedza Powszechna, Warsaw. It is essential to purchase the set of three tapes that go with the books.

For anyone going into this at all seriously it is also worth tracking down the excellent ‘301 Polish Verbs’ compiled by Klara Janecki for Barron’s Educational Series.

Encyclopaedia

The thousand page ‘Poland- An Encyclopaedic Guide’ (Polish Scientific Publishers PWN) fulfils a long standing need. It is the essential handbook for anyone who is predominantly English speaking and interested in Poland. Although it covers every aspect of national life it is the sections on Polish culture that are particularly outstanding.

Polish Literature

Henryk Sienkiewicz's massive Polish Historical trilogy ('Fire & Sword', The Deluge', 'Fire In The Steppes') set in the 17th Century is available in a magnificent English translation published by Hippocrene. They also publish first rate English translations of his Roman epic 'Quo Vadis' and of 'The Teutonic Knights', set in the Middle Ages.

One or two translations of Adam Mickiewicz's 19th century national epic poem 'Pan Tadeusz' are available in English. A definitive translation is still wanting.

There are several volumes of the work of living Polish Nobel winning poetess Wisława Szymborska available in English including 'Sound, Thoughts: Seventy Poems by Wisława Szymborska' (Princeton) and 'People On A Bridge' (Forest Books).

'Feelings, Young Poets of a New Poland' translated by Donald Pirie for Forest Books (UNESCO Publishing) is extremely rewarding.

Do not miss Jan Kochanowski's 'Laments' -a 16th Century classic brought to life in English by Seamus Heaney and Stanislaw Baranczak.

The novels of Tadeusz Konwicki can also occasionally be found in English translation. Look out for 'A Dreambook for Our Time' (1963), 'The Polish Complex' (1977), 'A Minor Apocalypse' (1979), 'Moonrise, Moonset' (1982), 'New World Avenue' (1986), and 'Bohin Manor' (1987).

For something much more light-hearted look out for 'Polish Love Poems - Quotations & Proverbs in Polish and English', a delightful little volume (the perfect St. Valentine's Day gift) from Hippocrene Books.

Remember it is well worth searching Amazon online for authors, poets and titles.

History Books

Polish history has been well served in recent years by three very fine and totally different works in English.

'God's Playground' (Oxford) is Norman Davies' great epic two volume history of Poland full of new ideas and insights and beautifully written. A condensed single volume 'Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland' is also available.

'The Polish Way' (John Murray) is Adam Zamoyski's study of the roots of Polish distinctiveness through a reinterpretation of the nation's history.

The newly published and totally admirable 'A Concise History of Poland' (Cambridge) by Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki truly lives up to its name and fills a long-standing need.

If it is the Second World War you are interested in then key works are:-

'Poland In the Second World War' by Józef Garlinski (Macmillan);

'Poles On the Fronts Of World War II' by Stefan Starba Baluk (ARS Print) is a huge, stunning and amazingly comprehensive album of photographs from the period presented with excellent captions and commentary.

'General Anders and the Soldiers of the Second Polish Corps' by Harvey Sarner (Brunswick Press);

'The Forgotten Few – The Polish Air Force in the Second World War' by Adam Zamoyski (John Murray);

'Poland's Navy 1918-1945' by Michael Alfred Peszke (Hippocrene).

Cookery Books

‘The big bumper book of Polish Heritage Cookery’ by Robert and Maria Strybel (Hippocrene) which runs to just short of 900 pages.

A more modest but well-illustrated starting point is ‘Polish Cooking’ published by Ex Libris.

‘The Polish Kitchen’ (Papermac) by Mary Pininska has lots of super easy to follow recipes.

‘The Best of Polish Cooking’ (Hippocrene) by Karen West is a beautiful collection of menus and recipes grouped by season.

‘Old Polish Traditions in the Kitchen and at the Table’ (Hippocrene) is an excellent introduction to the history of Polish cuisine built around excellent recipes.

Polish Folklore

The two truly indispensable volumes are:-

‘Polish Customs, Traditions & Folklore’ which explores the Polish year month by month in tradition and folklore.

‘Polish Herbs, Flowers & Folk Medicine’ which is self-explanatory.

Both are by Sophie Hodorowicz Knab and published by Hippocrene.

Bookshops and Suppliers

The Veritas Foundation Publication Centre at 63 Jeddo Road, London W12 9ED will supply books by post and produce an excellent catalogue. They can be e-mailed via ‘orders@veritas.knsc.co.uk’.

The PMS Bookshop at POSK, 238-240 King Street, London W6 0RF is excellent.

Polish Films

Poland has a fine reputation for producing excellent films since World War II. Andrzej Wajda, the most famous name in Polish post war cinema, is only the foremost among a galaxy of fine Polish film makers. His post war trilogy 'A Generation' (about the struggle of the younger generation in occupied Warsaw), 'Kanał' (as soldiers of the Warsaw Uprising try to escape through the sewers) and 'Ashes And Diamonds' (set in the moral chaos of the first days of peace) were landmark films. His 1976 'Man of Marble' exposed the moral corruption of post war communism in both the 1950s and the 1970s while 'Man Of Iron' takes the story on to the formation of Solidarność in the Gdańsk shipyards. His 'Danton', while ostensibly about the clash between Danton and Robespierre in the French Revolution, was also an allegory about the Martial Law period in Poland. It was no coincidence that Danton was played in the film by a Frenchman and Robespierre by a Pole. He started the new millennium with a beautiful and sensitive cinematic interpretation of Mickiewicz's great epic poem 'Pan Tadeusz'.

Many titles are available on Video compatible with British equipment. A growing number of Polish films are becoming available on DVD again on the same format as U.K. The companies listed here which supply books by post or the listed internet companies are the places to look. With videos they generally offer the choice of 'with' or 'without' English subtitles. With DVD releases there isn't a choice - either they are released with access to subtitles or not. It is well worth looking out for recent Polish blockbusters 'Fire & Sword' and 'Pan Tadeusz'. On a lighter note, the comedy thriller 'Kiler' is enormous fun and 'Kiler-ow 2-och' is almost as good. All four are out on video and DVD and the DVDs all carry English subtitles.

Polish Music

Once again, the companies listed here which supply books by post and the listed internet companies are the places to look. Classical music fans will know all about Chopin, Szymanowski, Lutosławski, Pendrecki and Górecki. Works by all these composers can be found on the excellent Naxos budget label.

'Przeboje Klasyki' (The Best of Classical Music) released on the Dux label for the Empik chain of bookstores is a two volume medium price compilation set of recordings by Polish artists. The '68 minute World' volume encompasses eighteen pieces by the world's great classical composers. The 'Polish' volume at over 78 minutes contains fourteen tracks by great Polish composers – Chopin, Moniuszko, Paderewski, Szymanowski, Wieniawski and even 'anon'.

Opera fans may not have yet discovered 19th Century Polish Opera composer Stanisław Moniuszsko. 'Straszny Dwór' and 'Halka' are the titles to look for.

Polish Early Music is an unexplored treasure trove that is largely undiscovered abroad. Any Polish Early Music on the Dux label will certainly merit exploration.

There is a huge range of Polish Folk Music available. The most serious enthusiasts should seek out 'Polskie Radio Muzyka Zrodel' (Polish Radio Sources of Polish Folk Music) which already runs to over twenty volumes!

The Trebunie-Tutki family from the Tatra Mountains play superb straight highland folk music on 'Music Of The Tatra Mountains' (Nimbus) and mix Highland Music and Reggae (yes, it works) on 'Twinkle Inna Polish Stylee'. A good starting place for both styles, and more, is 'Złota Kolekcja'.

Young and old alike love Golec uOrkiestra led by twin pony-tailed brothers who add trumpet and trombone and crazy lyrics to a boisterous amalgam of rock and highland style folk tradition. Essential!

In more traditional folk style look out for Orkiestra Sw. Mikolaja.

Young Poles are happily blending rock with traditional Polish folk music and adding all sorts of other influences to produce distinct and diverse for which the term folk rock is a quite inadequate description. The two key samplers are:-

'Travellin' Companion - A Musical Journey To Poland' (Welt

Wunder Records);

‘Pofolkuj Sobie!’ (Polskie Radio SA)

There are many great Polish rock bands. My favourites are Elektryczne Gitary. Look for ‘Nie Jestem z Miasta (the best of)’ and ‘Slawa (de best 2)’.

Christmas Carols

England and Poland are the two countries that are blessed with the most extensive and beautiful repertoires of Christmas Carols (in Polish ‘Kolędy’). The origins of many Polish carols are lost in time, others were written by poets down the ages and some are from folk tradition placing the events of the nativity story in a familiar snowy Polish mountain landscape. Poland is probably unique in its tradition of patriotic carols sung at Christmas by soldiers and insurgents down the ages. Only Poland could have a ‘Kolęda Wojenna’ - ‘The War Carol’. Two particular favourite and extensive collections are:-

‘Żołnierskie Kolędowanie’ (Polish Soldiers Sing Christmas Carols) by the Polish Army Ensemble (Caritas of the Field Ordinariate of the Polish Army);

‘Kolędy Polskie’ by Poznańskie Slowiki (Musicon).

Polish Community in U.K.

'Polski Informator' is the handbook for information about the Polish community in Great Britain. It can be obtained from the Information Bureau of the Federation of Poles in Great Britain at 240 King Street, London W6 0RF. Their e-mail address is 'office@fedpol.swinternet.co.uk

Polish Embassy and Consulates in the U.K:-

Polish Embassy in London
47 Portland Place, London WIB 1JH
Tel 020 7580 4324, Fax 020 7323 4018

Polish Consulate General in London,
73 New Cavendish Street, London WiW 6LS
Tel 020 7580 0476, Fax 020 7323 2320

Polish Consulate General in Edinburgh
2 Kinnear Road, Edinburgh, EH3 SPE
Tel 0131 552 0301, Fax 0131 552 1086

Polish Cultural Institute
34 Portland Place, London WIB IHQ
Tel 020 7636 6032, Fax 020 7637 2190

Polish Embassy Economic & Commercial Department
15 Devonshire Street, London WIG 7AP
Tel 020 7580 5481, Fax 020 7323 0195

Polish National Tourist Board in London
310-312 Regent Street, London W1B 3AX
Tel 020 7580 8811, Fax 020 7580 8866

Polish Consulate in Bristol
181, White ladies Road, Bristol BS8 2RY
Tel 0117 973 3233, Fax 0117 970 6160

Polish Consulate in Gibraltar
35 Governor's Parade, Gibraltar
Tel 350 74593, Fax 350 79491

Polish Consulate in Kidderminster
6 Osborne Close, Kidderminster, Worcs. DY10 3YY
Tel 01562 630523, Fax 01562 861145 consul@polish.zzn.com

Polish Consulate in Hull
41 North Bar Without, Beverley HU17 7AG

Tel 01482 465799, Fax 01482 466388 J.R.Carby-Hall@law.hull.ac.uk

Polish Consulate in Sheffield
4 Palmerston Road, Sheffield S10 2TE
Tel / Fax 0114 2766513 G.E.White@Sheffield.ac.uk

Just For Fun

“The Xenophobe’s Guide To The Poles’ by Ewa Lipniacka (Oval Books) is a brief and light hearted look at Poles. It is great.

APPENDIX I

WESTERN PERCEPTIONS OF POLAND

In the Autumn of 1998, I attended an absolutely first rate conference of Polish Honorary Consuls from E.U. states which was held at the delightful building which the Polish Foreign Ministry maintains for many such diverse purposes on ul. Foksal just off Nowy Świat in Warsaw. I say first rate because of the warmth of our reception, the quality of debate, and the general stimulus to our enthusiasm.

Subsequently I sent this brief paper to then Deputy Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski and to others. I do not know what they made of it. The paper is simplistic and directly to the point. It is aimed at a Polish readership. I hope that it can be appreciated in the spirit in which it was written in 1998. The text of that paper reads as follows:-

Western Perceptions of Poland

At the conference of Polish Honorary Consuls, organised by the Polish Foreign Ministry over 5th and 6th October 1998, there was much talk about Western perceptions of Poland.

This brief note is an attempt to explain how the British have come to have a particular and unique perception of Poland and the Poles. Any Pole living in England, and even just partially immersed in British society, will understand Radek Sikorski's delightful words in his book The Polish House':-

"In England, I had gotten used to being thought of as something of an exotic animal, coming from a strange faraway country so prone to invasion and disaster as to be positively careless. The unspoken assumption was that there must be something wrong with us - hopeless romantics ever ready to charge tanks on horseback - which makes us deserve our bad luck."

These British attitudes are deeply rooted and combined confused images of heroism and recklessness, which are only explicable if we look at the historic roots from which they arose.

In 19th Century British public opinion was enthusiastically, but sadly ineffectively, pro-Polish in the aftermath of the November and later uprisings. Indeed, the toleration and funding offered by the Victorian British Government to the radical and socialist elements within the Polish emigration who made their way to London is quite remarkable.

By 1918 however British political attitudes towards the Poles were far more negative.

Having fought alongside the forces of the Central Powers Piłsudski was inevitably suspect in British eyes and the deeply misunderstood endeavours of the Poles at the Versailles Peace Conference (1) were seen as ungrateful, arrogant and over weaning. British Prime Minister Lloyd George was particularly unsympathetic to Polish aspirations and Winston Churchill followed in his footsteps. During the Silesian Uprisings (2) British troops came to the aid of the Germans (although in Russia British Expeditionary Forces worked alongside the Poles!)

In the Polish-Russian War of 1919-1920 British opinion was generally hostile to Poland. Lloyd George said that the Poles deserved "a bloody nose"; there was much hostile comment in the House of Commons; and British unions blocked any supply of arms to Poland. Lord D'Abernon's enthusiastic endorsement of the Polish cause was completely out of line with mainstream British political thought.

Subsequently Polish policy towards Lithuania in relation to anchoring Vilna within the re-born Polish state was viewed by the British, understand Polish feelings on the issue (3), as mere military opportunism at the expense of a weaker neighbour.

Piłsudski was disliked by the British who viewed him only as an authoritarian military opportunist, with dangerous and grandiose aspirations for Poland which could endanger Central European stability. After Piłsudski's death the Polish regime was increasingly viewed as right wing and at least potentially anti-Semitic. The Polish military establishment was perceived as an arrogant elite concerned only with preserving its own status. (4)

It was fear of Germany rather than love of Poland that tied Britain to Poland in 1939.

The British are completely unaware that their failure to take immediate military action after September 1st 1939 came as a sore blow to the Poles. (5) The common British perception is that Britain fully met its obligations to Poland in full simply by declaring war on Germany without taking any action to come to the aid of the embattled Polish Republic.

In the early years of the Second World War, following the fall of Poland and France, Polish airmen, sailors and soldiers were greeted with enormous enthusiasm by the host British population.

The contribution of Polish airmen in the Battle of Britain is still a central factor in shaping British perceptions of Poland and the Poles

and indeed it is still the figure of the Polish pilot who is the role model for the 'heroic Pole' so beloved by the British.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union completely changed official British attitudes to the Poles. The Soviet Union was now a huge and invaluable ally to be courted diligently. The Poles, who were understandably anti-Russian after the events of September 1939 (6), were now viewed as an irritant and a menace and being of much less military significance than the mighty Soviets could be sacrificed if necessary, in the stampede to keep the Soviets happy.

Churchill established a secret Cabinet Committee under Lord Beaverbrook to produce a strategy to deal with the newly perceived 'Polish problem'. Beaverbrook's deliberations led to a sustained campaign in the British mass media to influence British public opinion towards the Poles in their midst. This can be summarised simply as a four-point approach:-

1. Of course Sikorski (7) is a great guy;

2. And the Polish Serviceman you know is a super fellow;

3. BUT, the Poles generally are grossly irresponsible;

4. And many of their Generals are fascists (!).

With the revelations of the Katyń massacre (8) (for which the British, desperate for their support, did not dare blame the Russians); the death of General Sikorski; and eventually the Yalta agreement the British government had ever increasing motivation to marginalise Poles and Polish interests.

So deeply implanted did these hostile attitudes to Poles become that at of the war there were many sad and unpleasant incidents and a strong, if informal and subsequently deeply regretted 'Poles go home' campaign. The British authorities skilfully decapitated the emergent Polish community in Britain by cutting Polish generals adrift without the funds to support themselves. They were aided in preventing the emergence of a strong Polish lobby in London by the fact that in the immediately post-war period 'putting down roots' in Britain was to admit that the communist puppet regime in Warsaw would continue!

It is hardly surprising that the Polish community in London (not even allowed to take part in the official V.E. Day celebrations in London) was largely invisible to its British hosts throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s and fell back almost entirely upon its own internal resources.

The events of the war years with this strange mixture of admiration

of Polish heroism in the Battle of Britain, Monte Cassino and the Warsaw Uprising, combined with a deliberately generated impression of Polish irresponsibility and recklessness, and latterly increasing guilt in educated British circles at the manner in which Poland was treated at Yalta all combined to produce the confused and often contradictory modern British perception of Poles and Poland.

The communist period in Poland confused British attitudes further. At one level Poles were known to be 'freedom loving' and 'anti-communist' but at another level Poland was now an ally of a hated and feared cold war Soviet Union.

The election of a Polish Pope, of intense interest to British Catholics, while otherwise popular and drawing some attention to Polish issues, did little to change mainstream British attitudes towards Poland. By contrast the emergence of Solidarność and the role of Lech Wałęsa had an enormous impact. Poles and Poland were suddenly seen as the great driving force for liberty and reform within the Soviet Bloc. The declaration of Martial Law, and the repression which followed, only served to further fuel British support for Poland's cause.

Within Britain strong pro-Polish sentiments of the period encouraged the Polish community in Britain to adopt a far more visible stance campaigning in support of demands for political, economic and human rights reforms in Poland. To an extent later events within the Soviet Bloc (the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Gorbachev period in Moscow) somewhat diminished the significance of the Polish contribution to the fall of communism in British eyes.

the post 1989 situation British attitudes to Poland and the Poles still have their roots in the complex package of contradictory attitudes inherited from the Second World War period and variously modified over later decades.

To that package of perceptions and misperceptions is now added other worries namely real concern in some political circles at the risk of 'offending' Russia by extending membership of NATO and the EU to include Poland and the other aspirant states. (9) There is also fear about the impact of absorbing Polish agriculture, and also the steel and textile industries, into the EU.

Fortunately, there are more positive developments.

Polish foreign and economic policy since 1989 is viewed by British political and media elites as consistent and positive. Both President Wałęsa and President Kwaśniewski have been well regarded. The smooth passage of Presidential and Parliamentary elections and of the and media elites as consistent and positive. All post 1989 Polish

Foreign Ministers have been highly regarded. The resulting changes in Government in Poland mean that Poland is now seen in Britain as being a 'truly democratic' state.

There is a large core of well-informed Parliamentarians, journalists, and academics in Britain sympathetic to Poland. This is particularly true of British Members of the European Parliament (although there will be difficulties after the naturally very differing efforts of the Polish Embassy in London, the 1999 Euro-Elections). (10) Federation of Poles in Great Britain, and Poland Comes Home have had a desirable effect on British public opinion and particularly British opinion leaders. The endeavours of Polish Trade Counsellors and the British-Polish Chamber of Commerce have also had a major impact.

The advent of cheap bulk Polish tourism to Poland (thanks to British companies like New Millennium) is probably the single most positive factor in improving grass roots perceptions of Poland among an ever-widening number of British citizens.

Over recent months there has been a sea change in the attitude of British commerce and industry towards Poland. There is increasing recognition of Poland as 'an important market of 40 million people' with 'an educated, hardworking and innovative work force' and Poland is increasingly described as the regional leader', the Polish tiger", 'the fastest growing economy in Europe', the heart of the golden triangle' etc., etc., etc. while reports now commonly assert that 'nothing must be done which will delay Polish membership of E.U.'. The increasing warmth of British commercial and business attitudes to Poland is particularly important as these interests will influence mass media attitudes to Poland which will in turn influence British grassroots public opinion. Although the perceptions of Poland and Poles noted by Radek Sikorski – who was of course writing of the situation before his return to Poland - are still deeply ingrained they are being steadily modified by the recent developments and new perceptions described above. We can say with some confidence that political, media, business and commercial elites are increasingly well informed and sympathetic to Polish aspirations. Grassroots public opinion is following albeit at a much slower pace.

There is still a great deal to do and efforts to influence and develop British perceptions of Poland should be redoubled on all fronts. In addition to current efforts it should be noted that there will be huge demands from British schools for suitable teaching material about Poland as it enters E.U. This will be an invaluable opportunity to influence long term British perceptions of Poland.

We are still vulnerable to the impact of British fears about the

impact of E.U. expansion on the British economy, casual slander and misunderstanding, and damaging news from Poland (particularly anything that might be perceived as irresponsibility' or anti-Semitism). There is also of course the risk that E.U. expansion may fall hostage to disputes between existing members.

Today the British still see Poland as a remote and distant country and the Poles as heroic but too reckless for their own good. Those traditional perceptions are increasingly modified by new images of Poland as a strong democracy with a relatively flourishing economy, a desirable holiday destination, an important ally and potential market and economic partner. It is essential that we do everything possible to develop and encourage these new perceptions of Poland.

Cllr Mike Oborski
Honorary Consul R.P.
Kidderminster, U.K. October 1998

Footnotes added for this book:-

(1) Roman Dmowski had consumed long hours at the Conference arguing the case for the widest possible boundaries for Poland.

(2) The struggles between local Polish and German communities for mastery of Silesia in the years immediately following the end of World War I.

(3) Vilna itself had a predominantly Polish population and centuries of mutual integration in the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth meant extensive cultural cross fertilisation. Poland's great national poet Adam Mickiewicz was Lithuanian and his great epic masterpiece - the Polish national poem - Pan Tadeusz' starts
with the words "Lithuania, my country, thou art like health; how much thou shouldst be prized only he can learn who has lost thee". Józef Piłsudski, the hero of reborn Poland, was Lithuanian!

(4) The failure of the Polish Second Republic to properly promote its image across inter-war Europe is one of the mysteries of the period made all the stranger by the obvious success of previous generations of Poles at promoting their cause abroad in far more difficult circumstances. That inter-war Polish governments were capable of such activity is demonstrated by their sustained and highly beneficial charm offensive' in the U.S.A.

(5) France and Britain had promised immediate military action if Poland was invaded. The fact that the promise was unrealistic and the Poles should not have relied upon it does nothing to get round the fact that Polish public opinion was deeply shocked and bitterly

disappointed by the failure of Britain and France to take immediate military action.

(6) With German connivance (the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact) the Soviet Union was able to invade Poland from the east in order to seize a huge chunk of Polish territory.

(7) General Władyslaw Sikorski, Polish wartime Prime Minister and C-in-C, a difficult but highly respected figure.

(8) The secret slaughter of many thousands of Polish officers and leaders by the Soviets in the Spring of 1940. The bodies were uncovered by the advancing Germans. Soviet guilt was obvious but the Russians tried to pin the blame on the Germans.

(9) This was written back in 1998. These fears have evaporated with Poland's smooth entry into NATO.

(10) At that time, we were assuming that the inevitable Tory gains in that election would mean a more Euro-sceptic and therefore more anti-extension British representation in the European Parliament. To our surprise our surveys and lobbying in the run up to the election showed that while Labour Party policy appeared to be more supportive their candidates appeared to be less so and that while Conservative Party policy appeared to be less supportive their candidates were more so. The problem did not materialise.

APPENDIX II

FATHER BERNARD'S CHILDREN'S FUND

Under the Communists the heavily industrialised region of Upper Silesia in Southwestern Poland became the most polluted place on Earth!

Children were poisoned in their mothers' wombs by the vast quantities of heavy metals and pollutants in the air they breathed and in the crops they ate!

The incidence of brain and physical damage at birth was the highest in the World.

At the end of the 1980s Government experts stated that there was not one totally fit child in the whole region.

Despite the great strides that have been made by the post-Communist Governments in Poland the region today has a sad legacy that will last long into the future.

Father Bernard's Children's Fund (registered charity 328677 in Great Britain) was established in 1990 in aid of the children who are the victims of the industrial pollution of Upper Silesia.

Father Bernard's Children's Fund can be found online at www.fbcf.org.uk'.

The Patron of Father Bernard's Children's Fund is Archbishop Szczepan Wesoły. The Committee consists of Edmund Szymczak (Chairman), Jerzy Szauman-Szumski and Maria Lee (Vice-Chairmen), Henry Lemiech (Treasurer), Jenny Davis, Władysław Kościukiewicz, Brenda Lemiech, Betty Maciocha, Pam Maleszewska, Fran Oborski, Ks. Jacek Trocim, Barbara Whitmore and Brenda Zych. The General Secretary is Cllr. Mike Oborski.

Today we work closely with the Rehabilitation Centre for Disabled Children in Katowice.

The Rehabilitation Centre for Disabled Children in Katowice is described on a commemorative plate at its entrance as a gift of human solidarity to help the disabled children.

In 1988, a Committee was formed chaired by Dr Aleksandra Kaluzna, who is now the Director of the Centre, and within two years - on 15th December 1990 - the Centre was opened in the presence of town, regional, and church authorities. At first part of the State Health Service since January 1993 the Centre has been run by the Katowice

Aid Foundation for Disabled Children as an independent health care institution. The Centre is mainly a unit of medical rehabilitation dealing with diagnosis and therapy for motor disorders of various origin, especially connected with central nervous system damage.